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## **Mother Feminism: A Study in Jewish American Literature**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Mother Feminism: A Study in Jewish American Literature

By

Hannah Jane LeDuff

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of Honors Requirements

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## Abstract

Traditionally, Jewish mothers in the orthodox practice of the religion are socially marginalized by the same patriarchy that institutionally reveres them. Orthodox tradition requires that Jewish women value family above all other aspects in life by fulfilling their divine calling: motherhood. Typically, the scholarly community regards orthodox Jewish mothers as oppressed by the patriarchy because they accept motherhood as a divine calling to which they have no alternative. Their arduous efforts in instilling progressive values in their children, however, reveal their feminist intentions despite the oppression they encounter within their religion. The term “mother feminism” describes Jewish mothers’ altruistic feminist actions which, though they cannot lessen their own oppression, create the possibility of lessening the oppression of their children. This branch of feminism is reconcilable with both their religion and their role as mothers. This essay investigates mother feminist behaviors in orthodox Jewish mothers in three Jewish narratives. Viewing each work through the lens of mother feminism allows the women in the stories to emerge as empowered female figures who subvert typical understanding of women oppressed by patriarchal expectations. Though each character’s mother feminism manifests in different ways, they all share an underlying desire to see their children prosper in a world less oppressive than the one in which they themselves were raised, and in fact, still live. In the past, these women’s actions have been labeled as mere obedience; by contrast, this thesis argues in favor of a redemption of these actions as not simply the result of obedience to the patriarchy, but also an effort to fight and end patriarchal oppression as a whole.

Keywords: Jewish, Orthodox Tradition, Feminism, Mother, Women, Family, Activism

## Dedication

To Mom, my very own mother feminist. You didn't know, but you were the inspiration for this project. Thank you for everything.

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## Introduction

Motherhood is an enforced institution in both Christian and traditional Jewish culture. Adrienne Rich maintains that there has always existed “a struggle between the sexes” (Rich 111). This struggle often leads to the marginalization of women because of their ability to give birth, an ability that men neither possess nor understand. In the epigraph to one of the chapters in her book, Adrienne Rich presents an ancient Persian myth in which several sons of the female creator of the world question her ability to give birth. Unable to create life in the same way and believing that her ability to give life necessitated her ability to also take life away, they killed her (Rich 110). In this myth, the roots of what Rich terms the “domestication of motherhood” reveal themselves. Women are forced into the role of mother by men; in fact, they are given no other alternative because, according to Rich, motherhood is a form of patriarchal control. Since the archaic time in which Persian myth was first told, women have still not progressed out of this state of patriarchal oppression. In fact, women have been further oppressed over time into a category of solely existing to be a mother. As Rich explains,

A woman is for a man both more and less than a person: she is something terribly necessary and necessarily terrible. She is not simply ‘more than an exploited worker;’ she is not simply the ‘other;’ she is first of all the Mother who is to be possessed, reduced, controlled, lest she swallow him back into her dark caves, or stare him into stone. (Rich 112)

It is this exact phenomenon of men oppressing women, confining them to the life of a mother and housewife, that Rich says is responsible for the continuation of patriarchy. The patriarchy, Rich says, requires

not only that women shall assume the major burden of pain and self-denial for the furtherance of the species, but that a majority of that species—women—shall remain essentially unquestioning and unenlightened. On this ‘underemployment’ of female consciousness depend the morality and the emotional life of the human family...

Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood... in [its] institutional form. (Rich 43)

Women, if allowed to focus their motivation and efforts on their career goals, would necessarily displace men in many of the fields in which they are currently dominant. Instead, they are burdened with the the societal expectation of getting married and raising a family. An equitable balance of genders in the world is therefore impossible. It naturally follows that men use this institution, labeling it as all women’s one true calling, in order to control them. Rich explains that deeming motherhood woman’s “sacred calling” has been occurring as long as women have been discriminated against. In colonial America, for example, if a woman chose not to marry and create her own family, her only option was to adopt the label of an “old spinster” and help her relatives with their housework and childrearing. Creating a career and supporting herself was not a viable option (Rich 43). This patriarchal oppression is a problem that all women deal with, but women of some religions, specifically the orthodox Jewish religion, endure a different brand of oppression from the patriarchy.

Traditionally, orthodox Jewish women are marginalized by the men in their religion. While an orthodox Jewish husband had an “unquestionable claim” on his wife’s sexual activities, the “wives had no equivalent claim on their husband’s sexuality” (Ilan 773). Additionally, divorce was an option “available only to the husband” (Ilan 773). Even in the supposedly “innovative” development of the Jewish marriage agreement known as the “Ketubah,” which was supposed to ensure the wife’s rights within marriage, divorce, and death, “named the

husband as the sole actor in his wife's property as long as he lived" (Ilan 773). This agreement was meant to provide a safety net for the wife in and out of marriage. Regardless of the state of the marriage, the husband was meant to take care of his wife and provide for her. The implication that the wife was unable to care for herself is evidence of just how marginalized women were in the Jewish orthodox tradition. While this kind of domination of the husband over his wife was frustrating, this is a relatively standard facet of patriarchal societies everywhere. For the orthodox Jewish woman, however, the religious traditions are most oppressive. For example, religious texts, specifically the Torah, were reserved for men. Ilan explains that the reading of the Torah, "the most prestigious activity in a Jew's life" was only for men, thus leaving women out of "the real scene of empowerment in Jewish culture" (Ilan 775). Further, "women have been kept marginalized in the synagogue... by restricting them to the women's gallery where they serve as spectators rather than full participators in the service" (Ilan 775). Needless to say, the orthodox Jewish religion has kept women on the margins of its most important institutional traditions.

This kind of marginalization transformed orthodox Judaism into a male normative religion. Michael Oppenheim explains, "gender is one of the central markers in Judaism and... in terms of gender the male is taken as normative" (Oppenheim 150). In Judaism, the men are the focal point of all religious activities. Similar to Christianity, in which "the church [is] an institution of sex inequality in its own right—for example, forbidding women priests," the Jewish synagogue is an institution of inequality disfavoring women (May 123). Ilan explains that "the Hebrew law-code of the Bible [says] it is inconceivable to imagine the Temple cult as consisting of female as well as male priests" (Ilan 775). Not only are women disallowed from participating, but their prospective participation is considered "inconceivable." Even God is

specifically gendered male. As Oppenheim explains, “Jewish tradition links exclusively male or masculine pronouns and imagery with God. God is spoken of as a ‘He’ and is often portrayed in terms of typical male roles, such as father, king, judge, warrior, etc. By apotheosizing the male or masculine as divine, the message emerges that men are the ultimate standard of value”

(Oppenheim 153). By establishing this precedent of the male as superior, “the consequence... is that Jewish women are regarded as both other and inferior” (Oppenheim 150). By allowing aspects of the religion to be masculinized, the Jewish religion essentially devalues the entire female gender. In a close reading by Judith Plaskow of Exodus 19:15, she demonstrates how women are left out of Jewish traditions. The verse, which serves to prepare the men to whom the Torah is to be revealed, cautions them to “Be ready by the third day; do not go near a woman.” Women are not among those who should “be ready,” and in fact, they are purposefully excluded from the revelation (Ilan 776). Only men would witness this event so pertinent to Jewish history, and the marginalization of women continues throughout both the Bible and history (Ilan 777). While men both control and benefit from this brand of religion, leaving women as simply a means of reproduction, a means by which to continue the Jewish religion.

Women were expected not only to produce children but put full efforts into raising them as well. According to Ilan, women were expected to remain in “the confined spaces of the household, where they were expected to remain concealed from the gaze of other men and to raise their children” (Ilan 775). Traditional Jewish men confine their women to motherhood, caring for future Jewish adults who will pass down their treasured ideals. If women knew that there was an alternate route to heaven that did not require them to live in subservience to their husband and family, many might choose to follow this route. However, the fact remains that women are led to believe that their true destiny is to become mothers. When they fulfill this

destiny, it is only natural that they pour all their energies and efforts into raising their children to the best of their ability. However, society has deemed this outpour of efforts as a result of oppression rather than an act of empowerment. As women are so marginalized in their religion, so society expects them to be within the household. The typical system of thinking follows that “women are either mothers full time and ‘fit’ or ‘nonmothers’ (by default or because ruled ‘unfit’)” (Rich 156). However, Rich explains that there is “another possibility: a motherhood whose meaning has to be constructed, invented, by the forbidden mother” (Rich 156). In this passage, Rich is talking about lesbian mothers and their reinvention of motherhood in their own capacities, as in lesbian motherhood there is no traditional “father figure.” They construct their own idea of what motherhood should be, and their definition does not always line up with the definition accepted by society. This scenario also can be applied to the orthodox woman in her society. The Jewish mother figure in the literature I evaluate in this thesis attempts to redefine motherhood in that she reconstructs the meaning of the institution of motherhood by adding to it an element of feminism. Society tends to reject the idea that women can be both mothers and feminists, however, Jewish mothers in literature seem to debunk this school of thought.

While feminist mothers have been the topic of scholarly conversation before, they remain an unconventional character type. Stephanie May explains that even though traditional feminist scholars have discussed the institution of motherhood before, “feminist mothers continue to struggle with raising children in a gendered and racialized world—often buttressed by religious beliefs and practices” because the two (motherhood and feminism) are thought to be irreconcilable (May 122). In this thesis however, I argue that in the figure of the Jewish mother the two are reconcilable. Because of the Jewish values instilled in them from birth, Jewish women have the correct disposition for bringing both motherhood and feminism together

in a form that benefits them and their children. That is why, in this thesis, it is necessary to focus on the Jewish mother figure rather than any other religion or race's mothers. Elizabeth V. Spelman explains that gender, as only a single defining factor of many in an individual, is an inadequate label when it comes to understanding their experience of human life. She says, "the particular race and class identity of those referred to simply as 'women' becomes explicit when we see the inapplicability of statements about 'women' to women who are not of that race or class" (Spelman 114). Every group of people experiences life differently, and by making generalized statements about motherhood or even women, it is easy to overlook the importance of each group's own life experience. A woman who is Jewish and a mother and of the lower class in early American society will necessarily experience life in a way that is specific to her own classifying traits. The Jewish mother's experience of life, in other words, her position as a mother while also being one who practices the Jewish religion, gives her the characteristics to be able to reconcile Judaism and feminism. These characteristics seem to appear in many Jewish mothers in American literature as an unacknowledged archetype. For this reason, I have created the term mother feminist to talk about such characters. In this thesis, I argue that mother feminists are women who seek justice for the wrongs done to them imparted on them by their parents and the patriarchal society in America by investing heavily in their children's lives and ensuring their children's equality in all aspects of their life, religious and otherwise.

As Joyce Antler explains, the stereotypical Jewish mother is "a universally recognized metaphor for nagging, whining, guilt-producing maternal intrusiveness" (xvii). This kind of mother is known for her overbearing preoccupation with her children; her care is so intense it seems an obsession. She constantly issues commands which require immediate obedience, and endlessly guilt-trips her children when she believes they have stepped out of line. These kinds of

images present the Jewish mother as a “maternal tyrant;” she is “the destructive American mother in extremis, the ultimate embodiment of overintense, harmful concern” (Antler xviii). She hopes this overinvolvement in her children’s lives will not only help them to develop into perfect adults, but also will keep them forever gratefully indebted to her. Often used as fodder for comedy, the Jewish mother archetype is most similar to what the modern world knows as a helicopter parent. At times overindulgent, but almost always overinvolved, this kind of parent hovers over their child, observing and directing every aspect of their life. A common joke that presents the Jewish mother in this way follows: “What’s the difference between a Jewish mother and a Rottweiler? Eventually, the Rottweiler lets go” (Antler xxi). Though humorous, this joke is based in the reality of the negative images that the words “Jewish mother” conjure.

Antler asserts that this image of the Jewish mother is a misrepresentation of the intentions of actual Jewish mothers. She questions whether “the Jewish mother stereotype miss[es] the complexity and diversity of real Jewish mothers” (Antler xix). Of course, stereotypes in general tend to misrepresent the individuals they concern because they reduce an entire group of people to one or two key traits that it would be impossible for every individual to possess. However, in this case, as I attempt to reconcile the Jewish mother figure with feminism, it is necessary to explain why this stereotype is particularly damaging. Since the immigration of Russian orthodox Jews to the United States in the late nineteenth century, the Jewish mother has become a recognizable and humorous stereotype famous for her overindulgence and overinvestment in her children. However, this investment is scorned by both her children and her society, who write it off as simply the actions of a silly woman who has no better amusements on which to spend her time. By forcing all Jewish mothers into the Jewish mother stereotype, not only are the efforts of

each individual mother in raising her children diminished, but her intentions are demonized as selfish actions designed to benefit herself rather than her children.

As a Jewish mother who cares deeply for her children herself, Antler maintains that these assertions are both untrue and unfairly assigned. She, who makes breakfast and packs lunches for her daughter every day, feels that it is unfair to label all Jewish mothers with the connotations of their stereotype. She felt especially connected to an anecdote told by one of her colleagues about his own Jewish mother. One day, in his excitement for the major league baseball game he would be attending, he and his brother left their lunches at home. Their mother rushed after them, following them all the way to the stadium, even making it past security without a ticket, just to give them their homemade lunches. While this may seem an act of overconcern, for surely the boys could have purchased food at the game, or at the very least, waited until they arrived home to eat, the gesture stemmed from his mother's genuine care and concern for the wellbeing and happiness of her children. Antler explains,

The caricature of the Jewish mother as guilt-tripping, overprotective, and controlling only partially grasps... my colleague's mother's behavior, ignoring the caring motivation behind [her] unflappable lunch-making. The core ingredient of this and other Jewish mothers' overbearing care is their deep and abiding concern for their children, which the flat stereotype fails to convey. (Antler xix)

While neither I nor Antler argue that Jewish mothers do not act in overbearing manners towards their children, I do argue that these mothers' actions can just as easily be generated from a place of authentic love. This perceived love is so strong that it inspires every decision and action made by Jewish mothers. It is this love that encourages them to stay home with their children, forgoing

their own personal goals and aspirations, and living in and attempting to change a world that has no regard for women like themselves.

Because their dedication to their children is their only outlet for their passion, many Jewish mothers are viewed as dominating figures in their children's lives. Antler notes that many Jewish writers create their mother characters "with extraordinary energy and sympathy, but often with an obsessive and confining control" (Antler 3). This care manifests itself in many diverse ways, all of them overwhelming in the eyes of their children. One of the most notable characteristics of the Jewish mother in literature is her tendency to sacrifice things in her own life in order to help her children flourish. It is common for critics to diminish the Jewish mother's sacrifices as "aggressive and manipulative;" these actions, they claim, are attempts to "liv[e] vicariously through her children... [by] domineering, meddling, [and] suffocating" them (Antler xxiii). While their acts may be "aggressive," the aggression stems from the passion they invest into mothering their children. Jewish mothers desire only the best and happiest life for their children, and they are intent on creating this reality for them, even if this means sacrificing their own personal happiness.

In their religion, Jewish women are marginalized by their male counterparts, but regardless of the contempt that they themselves experience, they still hold on to the hope that one day women will be treated differently. These women visualize a future where Jewish men and women can live with equal standing both religiously and in the world. Antler explains that especially in literature written by Jewish women, "these women talk of meaningful involvement in their children's lives and satisfaction with their roles as citizens and community members" (Antler xxvii). By investing in both their children, they hope to better their community indirectly. Though they may not be able to experience any kind of change in status during their lifetime,

they dedicate themselves to making sure their children are able to experience an equality in society which they will learn to pass down to their children. I argue that, in the novels that I evaluate in this thesis, the importance of the Jewish mother's job comes from their indirect investment in their community through their direct investment of their children's future. Antler explains that Jewish mothers' importance lies in the transmission of their own values to their children by both exhibiting acceptable behavior through actions as well as "holding fast to their values and using the domestic sphere to transmit them" (Antler 1). They know that the social climate and the equality of their society will not greatly be affected during their lifetime, but by raising their children to embrace gender equality, they also make strides in the feminist movement. They teach their sons to treat women equally, and they teach their daughters not to accept anything less than the equal treatment they deserve. I argue that their selflessness is what allows them to be categorized as feminists.

In my usage, mother feminism is a combination of typical feminism and Jewish feminism. Michael Oppenheim explains that at its base, "the most distinctive and important features of feminist philosophy include a (political) commitment to justice; the salience of gender as a category of experience and an analytic category; and heightened sensitivities to concrete experiences, especially the experiences of voices of those who have been marginalized" (Oppenheim 215). Feminists seek equality between men and women because it is just. They recognize that gender affects their life experience. They identify with other groups that have been pushed aside by the white patriarchy. Combining Jewish ideals with these principles yields the term "Jewish feminism," which at its core desires equality between Jewish women and men on the grounds of religious beliefs. Oppenheim explains that Jewish feminism "speak[s] of those most important issues of human life out of the resources of Jewish experience or memory,

especially the experiences and memories of Jewish women” and “include[s] recognition of historical ways that Jewish women have been oppressed, repressed, and marginalized in the Jewish tradition” (Oppenheim 216). Jewish women experience their femininity in a different way than other women because they have been oppressed not only by men within the confines of the Jewish religion, but also in an anti-Semitic world in general because of their affiliation with the Jewish religion. Using these two definitions, I read three characters from Jewish American fiction created by Anzia Yeziarska, Abraham Cahan, and Grace Paley to create a definition for the feminism of mothers, mother feminism, that explains the nature of the kind of feminism practiced by Jewish mothers who have accepted their oppression but are hopeful for the futures of their children.

Traditionally, mothers whose occupation it is to stay at home to raise children, cook, and do the housework are not included in the category of radical feminists. Traditionally, orthodox Jewish women, understood to be oppressed by a patriarchal religion, are left out of the feminist category as well. In Jewish American literature, however, there are several mother characters that exemplify what I interpret to be striking feminist views. While generational differences do affect the mindset of these women, the underlying feminist values remain the same across the board. Grace Paley, author of many Jewish-themed short stories, was born in New York to immigrant parents; because she grew up in America in a culture where secular Judaism, or the less intense practice of Judaism, was more acceptable, her works illustrate a more modern spin. Paley is a known feminist and civil rights activist, so the feminism demonstrated by her character Faith is unsurprising. Even orthodox Jewish mother characters in earlier Jewish American literature, however, demonstrate these feminist tendencies. For example, both Abraham Cahan, author of *The Rise of David Levinsky*, and Anzia Yeziarska, author of *Bread Givers*, are first generation

immigrants raised in orthodox Judaism. They were born in the Russian empire and demonstrate much of the “Old World” values in their writing. Although these writers focus on women in the Old World who are oppressed by patriarchy, feminist resistance can still be observed in their characters’ actions. These traits are visible in Yeziarska’s character Bessie Smolinsky in *Bread Givers*, Cahan’s character Dora in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, and Paley’s character Faith in the short story “Two Short Sad Stories from a Long and Happy Life.” These female characters demonstrate mother feminism through their relationships with those around them—their children, their husbands, other mothers in their community, and even with their own mothers and fathers. Because their feminist views are backed by actions that could be considered unorthodox when compared to the normal actions of feminists, I will use the term mother feminism in this thesis to describe this ideology of Jewish mothers. Though each character lives in such a way that seems as though their feminism should be crushed by the controlling patriarchy, the overwhelming feeling I was confronted with at the end of each story was that each of these women truly were feminists.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Dora's Self-Sacrifice as Mother Feminism

In Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), the character Dora is the epitome of the over-concerned, bossy Jewish mother trope. As she interacts with her daughter Lucy, it becomes clear that Dora wants the best for her daughter; she works almost obsessively to make sure that her daughter's future is brighter than her own. To that end, Dora wants Lucy to be able to marry for love rather than have an arranged marriage, so she works tirelessly to educate herself in topics such as American English, table manners, and social pleasantries in order to better equip Lucy with the skills she needs to marry any husband she may choose. While these intense parenting tactics consume her life, her outlook begins to change slightly when she meets David Levinsky. Levinsky charms her; she falls in love with him, and she laments that she was unable to marry for love. For a while she maintains a relationship with Levinsky, indulging in her own fantasies, but she soon realizes that, as a married woman, she must choose between her own enjoyment and her family. Her rejection of Levinsky, however, seems to attract him even more; it seems Dora's dedication to her role as wife and mother remind him of the days when his own mother sacrificed her happiness and wellbeing to ensure the success of his future. Unfortunately for Levinsky, the very trait that attracts him to Dora also tears her away from him. He admires her dedication to her family, but Dora's dedication to her family requires her to stay faithful to her husband. Though she loves Levinsky and would probably like to divorce Max to marry him and pursue her own great love story, she refuses in favor of mothering Lucy and making sure that she has everything that Dora herself did not have. Her investment in Lucy requires her to sacrifice her own happiness with Levinsky, but the prospect of Lucy's success is worth her sacrifices. Dora's dedication to her family regardless of her own personal feelings

explains why I categorize her as a mother feminist. In this chapter, I offer a closer look at her relationship with her daughter and David Levinsky to make that case.

When Dora first appears in the novel, Levinsky is attracted to her maternal and domestic qualities; he sees her as a hard worker even though she does not earn an income outside the home. Though Levinsky's mother died when he was a child, he remembers (and notes throughout the novel) the toil she endured as she "strove to support herself and me by peddling pea mush or doing odds and ends of jobs," and he recalls the constant love he received from her despite her personal trials (Cahan 4). Similarly, Dora supports her own children, but unlike Levinsky's mother, she does not support them monetarily with a wage-earning job. That a man so focused on monetary compensation for work as Levinsky should be so interested in Dora speaks volumes to the care and love she must invest in her domestic duties. According to Allison Schachter, in the seventeenth century, Jewish women were actually considered the primary breadwinners of their household until "European bourgeois gender norms" convinced them that they should be otherwise (Schachter 13). While they used to work to support their family monetarily, the nineteenth century shifted their role from the workplace to the household "while Jewish men transformed themselves into ideal breadwinners" (Schachter 13). Rather than frame women as dutiful caretakers of their children and homes, they were then illustrated as "greedy consumers" who wasted their husbands' income. Schachter notes that "a Jewish woman's practical concern for her children's welfare... by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, [was] dismissed, disparaged, and satirized" (Schachter 13). Jewish mothers were pushed into the domestic sphere to care for the home and the children, but in using money to do so, they were satirized and depicted as leeches who suck away their husbands' income. It is important, therefore, that Levinsky sees Dora's domestic work as attractive. He, as a wage-earning male, is entitled by history to consider

a woman who lives on her husband's income as a freeloader. Despite that history, he instead greatly admires the love she demonstrates for her family through her hard work. Though her husband Max is the wage-earner of the family, Dora works equally hard to provide for the family for whom she cares deeply. Levinsky sees this love demonstrated by Dora's meticulous effort to make him, her boarder, comfortable and happy in their shared home.

The first time Levinsky meets Dora, she is busy cooking for her husband. When Max asks her to make him and Levinsky a cup of tea, she responds with a "look of resentment" and says, "It's a good thing you are telling me that... Otherwise I shouldn't know what I have got to do, should I?" (Cahan 224). Though her answer is sarcastic, its importance is twofold because it can be interpreted in two different ways. First, it shows that Dora understands her duty as the woman of the house. She was already "leaving the room for the kitchen" when Max requests she make tea for him and his guest (Cahan 224). She does not need Max to tell her to do this because she was doing it on her own. Second, it demonstrates Dora's disdain for Max's orders, as she is already busy with other, more important duties that do not involve entertaining Max's guest. With her existing responsibilities, which include keeping the house clean, cooking three meals a day, and looking after two young children, she need not add more chores to her agenda to remain occupied. Regardless of her own schedule, however, she makes Levinsky "a glass of Russian tea" and "urge[s] him not to let [it] get cold" (Cahan 224, 229). Because the tea is Russian, and because Dora clucks over him as he drinks it, Levinsky is seemingly reminded of the love and attention that his mother once gave him. He notices that the glass is "scrupulously clean" and that the house was "well kept and tidy" (Cahan 229). Dora's meticulous domesticity is equated in his mind with love. Though Dora's work does not mimic the peddling nature of his mother's, the loving intention behind the work remains identical. He recalls his mother's efforts to care for

him, and explains that “Left to her own resources, [his] mother strove to support herself and [him] by peddling pea mush or doing odds and ends of jobs. She had to struggle hard for [their] scanty livelihood... I was her all in all” (Cahan 4). Dora’s scrupulous dedication to keeping house, he is reminded of his mother, and thus equates her with feelings of love and care he felt in his childhood. In Levinsky’s musings about Dora’s proclivity for the finer points of domesticity, Dora’s immense care for her children is highlighted.

Dora’s care for her children is further highlighted in her interest in education. She wants to educate herself not only for her own sake, but also for theirs. Cahan gives in-depth descriptions about Dora’s desire to be a more educated woman. Using her daughter Lucy, who was enrolled in an American school, as a teacher, Dora begins her journey of learning the English language. David Levinsky observes Dora’s method of learning, noting how she would “make efforts to speak to [Lucy] in the language that had become the child’s natural means of expression” (Cahan 245). The language that Dora typically speaks is Yiddish, but as Lucy flourishes in her American life, she begins to speak more English than Yiddish. Levinsky notes that “Lucy abandoned her native tongue altogether. She still understood her parents, of course, but she now invariably addressed them or answered their Yiddish questions in English” (Cahan 245). Though Dora had already begun her attempt to speak English to Lucy, this switch in Lucy’s language encouraged her to work harder than ever to speak Lucy’s language. Levinsky recalls that “It was a sorry attempt at first; but she was not one to give up without a hard struggle. She went at it with great tenacity, listening intently to Lucy’s English and trying to repeat words and phrases after her” (Cahan 245). Levinsky describes his experiences with her competitive spirit as she learns to speak English, recalling how

“she was frankly parading her intellectual achievements before me, and I could see that she took them quite seriously. She was very sensitive about the mistakes she made. She accepted our corrections... with great earnestness, often with a gesture of annoyance and mortification at the failure of her memory.” (Cahan 235)

Dora, though unable to receive a formal education, still pursued further knowledge. Even though she had to learn through her daughter in a reversal of their typical roles, she still felt that it was important to educate herself.

In an essay about Cahan’s life and the plot of one of his other novels, Lori Jirousek-Falls offers an insight that is applicable to Dora’s situation. Jirousek-Falls explains that as an intern under Lincoln Steffens, an important late nineteenth-century journalist and editor, Cahan learned enough to work as a journalist, though he never received a formal education in that field. Because of his own experience with education, Cahan was inspired to write about the nontraditional education Jewish immigrants often experienced. Jirousek-Falls writes, “in the *Commercial Advertiser* [Steffen’s newspaper], Cahan chronicled the broad educational experiences of Jewish immigrants, exploring the advantages of both intentional and incidental learning and immigrants’ different educational goals” (Jirousek-Falls 36). Immigrants at this time, so busy with attempting to make a living that they do not have time to receive a formal education, often learn in environments other than the classroom. As Jirousek-Falls points out, Cahan demonstrates in *David Levinsky* this same desire for an atypical, out-of-classroom education. David Levinsky, for instance, finds it in his industry work, which “was not merely physical exertion. It was a source of intellectual interest as well” (Cahan 157). Levinsky’s interest in the efficiency of his sewing as a kind of education allows Cahan to imply “the immigrants integrate [alternate] modes of education as a means of survival and personal

fulfillment” (Jirousek-Falls 44-45). In this same way, Dora also finds fulfillment in her learning through Lucy. Her enjoyment and fulfillment received through this kind of learning is so intense that “she had formed the theory that [Lucy] was born to go to school for her mother’s sake as well as her own— a little angel sent down from heaven to act as a messenger of light to her” (Cahan 246). Not only does Dora not drop her educational interests because of her status as a mother, but she actually uses her position as Lucy’s mother to help further her own education. In this respect, she is a mother feminist. Her dedication to the education of women, including herself, leads me to read her as a feminist character. She earns the mother feminist title as she invests her passion for education into her daughter along with herself. Though Dora wants to learn as much about English, reading, and writing as she can, her main priority is that Lucy learns these things so that she can have a successful future.

From the beginning of the “Dora” section of the novel, it is clear that Lucy is Dora’s favorite child, and that she wants Lucy to have a better life than she herself had. Cahan writes that “her devotion to her children was above that of the average mother,” but that her attention to Lucy was even more excessive than her attention to her son (Cahan 253). This is, at least in part, because of the way her own mother treated her when she was a child. She explains to Levinsky,

“My mother— peace upon her soul— told me to throw all fancies out of my mind, that I was a simple girl and must get married without fuss. And I did. In this country people have different notions. But I am already married and a mother. All I can do now is to see to it that Lucy shall be both educated and happy... never let me talk of these things again. They must be locked up in my heart and they key must be thrown into the river, Levinsky.” (Cahan 277)

Dora has accepted her place as a wife and mother. She was forced into this life by her mother at a young age, and she knows that it is now too late to wish any different for herself. However, she knows she can be a better mother than her own was by applying her own feminist ideals to her ideals of motherhood. She sees a greater future in store for her daughter; in fact, she yearns to see her daughter live in a far greater happiness than she herself ever experienced. While her own mother encouraged her to accept her future and “throw all fancies out” of her mind, she wants her daughter to be able to enjoy these “fancies” if she so desires. She wishes her daughter to receive an education and a husband of her own choosing. She pleads with David not to ask her about these emotions again. She knows that she cannot evaluate her own life without dwelling on what her life could have been. Instead of allowing herself to become discontent with her life, she chooses to invest these emotions into ensuring her daughter’s comfort in the American life she now has, a comfort she believes will also ensure her happiness.

Not everyone views Dora’s actions in this way. Ruth Adler notes, perhaps looking too superficially at the situation, that Dora “lives vicariously through her daughter as she acquires American culture norms in school” (Adler 29). Dora does spend a large amount of time learning from Lucy’s books and teachings, but she also attempts to train Lucy in the American way in order to set her up for a kind of success and happiness that Dora was never able to have. Adler brings to light the particular scene in which Dora teaches Lucy proper table manners. As they dine, the following conversation passes between mother and daughter:

“Don’t reach out for the herring, Lucy!’ [Dora] would say sternly. ‘How many times must I tell you about it? What do you say?’

‘Pass me the herring, mamma, please.’

Not ‘mamma.’

‘Pass me the herring, mother, please.’

The herring is passed with what Dora regards as a lady-like gesture. ‘Thank you, ma’am,’ says Lucy.” (Cahan 254)

Though Adler dismisses this scene as a humorous depiction of “young Jewish mothers awkwardly groping to acclimate themselves and their offspring to a new environment,” I believe it holds a much larger significance (Adler 29). In this scene, Dora equips her daughter with the necessary table manners required of an American lady to marry an upper- or middle-class American man. Though the gestures and language may seem silly, and perhaps they are, they demonstrate Dora’s investment in ensuring Lucy’s happiness in the future. She tells Levinsky, “[Lucy] certainly shan’t marry without love. Her happiness will be mine, too. That’s the only kind I am entitled to. She shall go to college. She shall be educated. She shall marry the loved one of her heart. She shall not be buried alive as her mother was” (Cahan 301). She wants Lucy to have every opportunity that she herself never had, including the opportunity to be well-educated. After all, with an education her daughter will likely have an even greater opportunity to marry for love than out of sheer necessity.

Adler does not appear to consider that larger social context. Yet Dora herself only married Max because her family arranged it. Her experience with David proves to her how much she lost by not experiencing true love; I believe that she wishes she had been given the opportunity to marry for love and wants the same for her daughter. Dora’s relationship with Levinsky gives her a taste of the romantic love she has always wanted; Levinsky even asks for Dora’s hand in marriage. Though she is enticed by the idea at first, Dora feels guilty because her secret relationship goes against her Jewish values of marriage and family. In the orthodox Jewish religion, “marriage is more than a legal relationship; it is sanctified upon its consummation and

carries with it religious significance” (Loewenstein 7). According to Meir Soloveichik, the Jewish “bride and groom are not just two contracting parties but two loving and beloved companions, joined in establishing a home” (Soloveichik 49). The goal of unity between two Jewish people is to create a home; Dora and Max have accomplished this goal in their marriage. To violate their union would be to tear apart their home, and for Dora there is no action more despicable. When Levinsky suggests she divorce Max, she merely “shook her head sadly” and “kept shaking her head” as Levinsky pleaded with her (Cahan 301). Levinsky accuses her of “pretending” to love him and tells her, “thousands of couples get divorced” (Cahan 301). Dora’s love for Levinsky is not pretend. She loves him dearly; admitting to him that she cannot marry him and that he must move out of her home leaves her heart with “a big, big wound” (Cahan 300).

Dora’s own happiness, however, is not her top priority. Her love for her children is much stronger than her love for Levinsky. The strength of her love is evident even before Levinsky tries to convince her to leave Max. Earlier in the novel, Levinsky notes that “Lucy would arouse [his] jealous rancor, as a living barrier between her mother and [him]self” (Cahan 288). Dora’s attachment to Lucy is so strong that she would forfeit her own happiness just to benefit her daughter. When Levinsky asks her to leave her husband she says, “What would you have me do? Let Lucy find out some day that her mother was a bad woman? I should take poison first” (Cahan 301). She would rather die than allow Lucy to know how she ruined her family. Dora embodies Rothchild’s idea that Jewish mothers do their “utmost so that [their] children would not lack what [they] had missed” (Rothchild 4). Dora wants to make sure that Lucy has the chance to find happiness in her adult life, and she is willing to sacrifice everything, even her own happiness, to accomplish this goal. It is this consideration of her daughter, I believe, that

prevents her from giving up the family she has now even to pursue the happiness she has always wanted. Therefore, when Adler argues that Dora is simply living through her daughter, she ignores the mother feminist element that, I argue, requires Dora to sacrifice her happiness for her daughter. Though there may be, as Adler suggests, a part of Dora that lives vicariously through her daughter, the more dominant part of her simply wishes Lucy success because she was never able to have it for herself. Adler even admits that “Cahan lovingly describes [Dora as] an exceptionally doting and devoted mother in a manner uncharacteristic of his generally more objective narrative style” (Adler 30). It seems that Cahan desires to highlight Dora, not as an overbearing helicopter parent, but rather as a passionate parent who wants the best for her daughter. Through her desire to see Lucy live the best life possible, Dora demonstrates the traits of mother feminism. Though she has long resigned herself to live out the fate assigned to her by her parents, she sees herself helping future generations by making sure Lucy does not suffer in the same way. This selflessness is one of the traits that so attracts Levinsky to Dora in the first place.

Throughout the “Dora” section, Levinsky is often struck by Dora’s care for her family; unfortunately for him, the exact thing that attracts him to Dora is what ultimately pushes her away. When he first realizes that he is attracted to her, he notes that “those eyes of hers do not express anger, but integrity... And the more I looked at her... the stronger grew my impression that she was a serious-minded, ingenuous woman incapable of playing a part” (Cahan 234). It is in Dora’s “truthful face” that Levinsky finds a kind of nurturing comfort that he has not felt since his mother passed away when he was a child. For Levinsky, who previously had enjoyed women for their bodies only, it was a momentous occasion when he realized that he “adored her soul even more than I did her body. I was under her moral influence, and the firmness with which she

maintained the distance between us added to my respect for her” (Cahan 291). His attraction to Dora is based on more than just her physical body. Instead, he is attracted to the aura that she exudes of a maternal homemaker. She encourages him to maintain his morals because she herself is so moral. She requires that he keep his distance from her because she does not want the affair to affect her family, or, as I have argued, to threaten her daughter’s future.

It is understandable, then, as Sanford E. Marovitz notes, that when Dora does give in to Levinsky’s advances, “she suffers overwhelming remorse; and in a short but brilliantly Jamesian scene in Stuyvesant Park, she abruptly ends their relationship” (Marovitz 25). As Marovitz suggests, Levinsky sees in Dora a traditional Jewish mother like his own and feels compelled to take ownership of her (Marovitz 26). He does not, however, read any feminism in Dora, arguing instead that her traditional role as a Jewish mother inspires her to refuse to succumb to Levinsky’s pursuit. Unlike Marovitz, I argue that it is precisely the notion of a Jewish mother feminism that prevents her from having an affair with Levinsky. As Marovitz argues, regardless of the personal sacrifice required, she wants the best for her family. In the end, her happiness is less important than the happiness of her children, and in particular, as I argue, the happiness of her daughter.

At the end of the novel, Levinsky meets Dora after sixteen years had passed, and she still felt the same way about her daughter’s happiness. During their encounter, Dora explains to Levinsky that Lucy’s husband does not meet her original expectations; she wanted Lucy to marry a man she loved, but Lucy decided to marry a rich man because he had money. Dora explains to David that Lucy “cares for her husband, and they really get along very well. He certainly worships her. Why shouldn’t he? She is so beautiful... and he is old enough to be her father” (Cahan 490). Dora resents Lucy’s decision to marry an old man whom she did not love when she

was given the opportunity to marry whomever she pleased. Dora herself would have loved to marry a man for love but was told she must marry “without fuss” (Cahan 277). When Lucy began expressing her desire to marry for money, Dora “begged her not to break [her] heart” (Cahan 490). She could not stand the idea of her child, whom she raised with the skills and manners to marry any man she loved, marrying an old man for his money. She explains to Levinsky, however, “I had other ideas about her happiness, but I am only a mother and was not even born into this country. So what does my opinion amount to?” (Cahan 490). Though Dora still sounds bitter about her daughter’s decision, she acknowledges that her Russian immigrant values necessarily differ from her daughter’s American values. As she continues to describe Lucy’s new husband to Levinsky, she makes sure that Levinsky knows her daughter did not make a bad choice in marrying him. She tells him, “You must not think her husband is a kike, though... He is no fool and he writes a pretty good English letter. And he is a *very* nice man” (Cahan 491). She did not originally approve of Lucy’s decision, but she ultimately tries her best to reconcile herself with it by remaining positive about the marriage. She focuses on the positive aspects of the new husband, noting specifically his intelligence and his kindness towards Lucy. Though Lucy does not find happiness in the way that Dora originally expected, by marrying a man she loved, she still found her own kind of happiness. Dora, as a mother feminist, loves her daughter unconditionally and thus supports her daughter unconditionally. Frustrated as she might be by her daughter’s rejection of her own values, Dora ultimately empowers her daughter to take the path that makes her happiest, regardless of the underlying values involved in that decision.

The feminist label is not one typically given to Dora, but her support of her daughter in all situations throughout the novel categorize her as a mother feminist. She sacrifices everything that is important to her in her life in order to make sure that Lucy has the best possible future.

Throughout the novel Dora shows intense interest in education; she likes to learn Lucy's English lessons, and never feels satisfied with her knowledge. The emphasis of her education in this manner, however, is not selfish. She strives to educate herself so that she can better educate her daughter, and she will not allow anything to get in between this end goal. Even her lover David Levinsky, who makes her feel truly happy and loved for the first time, is not a priority for her in comparison to her work to create a better future for Lucy. David does not understand Dora's obsession with her daughter, and even Lucy herself seems to feel overwhelmed by her mother's involvement at times, but Dora never harbors any ill will toward her daughter. Her intentions stem from the powerful love she has for Lucy. Because she loves her so much, she is unable to sit idly by while Lucy blindly stumbles through life. Dora wants Lucy to follow a precise plan that will lead to her ultimate happiness and success. While Dora's efforts may be vigorous, they are not malicious. Her hopes for Lucy demonstrate her faith in the possibility of a better future for women than what she herself experienced. Acknowledging that she is unable to change her own fate, she instead stimulates her own activism by investing in Lucy's future. Though Lucy does not achieve Dora's ideal future, she does end up pursuing her own happiness, which nevertheless fulfills Dora's original goal. Dora's efforts as a mother feminist are not only notable, but successful, because at the end of the novel her daughter is happier than Dora herself is.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Bessie Smolinsky: Love and Autonomy through Motherhood

Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925) follows narrator and undeniable active feminist Sara Smolinsky throughout the novel. In this chapter, I analyze the character Bessie, Sara's older sister, who embodies the characteristics of mother feminism though she does not have biological children of her own. Raised by her immigrant father and mother, strict adherents to the orthodox Jewish tradition, Bessie is instilled with Jewish familial values from birth. While her mother peddles odds and ends to make a living, her father is a Talmud scholar, and does not earn any wages to support his family. Bessie is tasked with helping her mother make ends meet. She gives all of her wages to support her family, and she earns the title "burden bearer." While her sisters use their wages to buy pretty dresses to help them get engaged, Bessie works herself ragged to make sure her family members are properly fed. She even sacrifices her own proposal because she wants to ensure that she can provide for her father. Though her obedience to her father seems to be a manifestation of oppression from the orthodox Jewish religion, providing for her father seems to give her a sense of fulfillment. Without her, her father and family would starve; Bessie finds autonomy in her ability to be the main provider for her family, and she is able to express her care for her family through her actions. Her devout commitment to her father without hope of any personal gain prepares her for a future of providing for children under similar circumstances. It foreshadows her dedication to providing for Zalmon's children even though she has to endure an unhappy marriage to do it. When Bessie finally marries, she is physically repulsed by her new husband, but the marriage allows her to maintain this same sense of fulfillment. While the man disgusts Bessie, she accepts his proposal because not only can he take care of her father, but his children desperately need a mother. Though her primary responsibility now lies in providing

for her husband's house, she rests knowing her father is also provided for. Meanwhile, in her new house, she gladly takes on the role of mother; though she cannot stand her new husband, her step-children provide her with a sense of fulfillment just as providing for her father did. While neither Bessie's father nor her newly adopted children seem adequately appreciative of her hard work, her altruism is rewarded with a sense of self-fulfillment that spurs her continued dedication to her family.

Bessie first learns to gain self-fulfillment through verbally unrewarded, altruistic actions, serving her father and supplying him with the entirety of her own wages. Her father, the stereotypical patriarchal Talmud, scholar Reb Smolinsky, and her mother, who looks past his domineering nature to provide a comfortable home for him, expose Bessie to an oppressive patriarchal version of the orthodox Jewish religion. Reb Smolinsky preaches to his daughters that "If a man wants a wife, he looks for one who can cook for him, and wash for him, and carry the burden of his house for him" (Yeziarska 64). He does not believe women are good for anything other than domestic tasks. He ardently studies the Torah, and he isolates certain verses to use against his wife and daughters for his own personal advantage. He tells them, "A woman's highest happiness is to be a man's wife, the mother of a man's children" (Yeziarska 206). Though he truly believes this, he fails to see how his treatment of his wife only robs her of happiness instead of providing her with it. His patriarchal ways are demonstrated in his abuse of several verses from the Talmud in order to solidify his superiority over his wife and daughters. He even goes so far as to verbally assault his wife and daughters by questioning their own validity as humans: "What's a woman without a man? Less than nothing— a blotted-out existence. No life on earth and no hope of Heaven" (Yeziarska 205). The irony in this statement overwhelms his daughters, because they know that without their work, their father would be the

one without a life on earth. All of his daughters, but especially Bessie, work their hardest to earn wages to support him and each other. Without their wages, he would starve. Although each of these women feels particularly burdened by her obligation to support her father, Bessie allows his abuse of her hard work to continue much longer than it should. Before she even contemplates the prospect of her own marriage or children, she demonstrates the characteristics of mother feminism by putting off her own goals and desires to continue to provide for him.

Even when pursuing her own proposal, Bessie is unable to put aside the needs of her family. For example, she cannot selfishly pursue Berel Bernstein, the first suitor she has ever had, even though she desperately wants to marry him. Her actions to woo him reflect her dedication to her family even in a matter that should be self-focused. The first time Berel comes to the house to call on Bessie, her efforts to clean the house demonstrate the fulfillment she feels in taking care of her family. One night when Bessie was meant to turn her wages in to her father, she instead brought out “three packages, a new oilcloth for the table, a remnant from a lace curtain to tack around the sink, to hide away the rusty pipes, and a ten-cent roll of gold paper for the chandelier to cover up the fly dirt that was so thick you couldn’t scrub it away” (Yeziarska 36). Her efforts to clean up the house were directed towards impressing Berel, but had she wanted his admiration, she just as easily could have bought herself a new dress. Instead, she buys decorations for the house, which her entire family may enjoy alongside her. She asks her sister Mashah to help her clean up the house, telling her “You, too, will feel good if somebody should come in and find the house looks decent” (Yeziarska 37). Bessie’s purchases of décor for her family’s house as well as her efforts to clean the house make her feel “good.” I label this “good” feeling as self-fulfillment because in this moment, though her efforts are meant to help her secure a proposal from Berel, they are not selfish. By cleaning the house up and making it look more

beautiful, Bessie not only enhances her own image, but her family's as well. When Berel arrives at the house, he will be impressed not by Bessie's efforts, for he will not know that she has quickly cleaned up before her arrival, but by the family's home. This projected image of herself and her family gives her the "good" feeling that she urges Mashah to seek as well.

It seems obvious that Bessie should try to escape from her father's oppression as soon as possible, but even when Berel Bernstein proposes to her, she refuses on the grounds that she needs to stay to provide for her father. While her other sisters concerned themselves with their looks so that they could attract men, "Bessie gave every cent she earned to Father and had nothing left to buy herself something new" (Yeziarska 36). By refusing to let Bessie marry, her father denies her the ability to leave him when she reaches the appropriate age because he needs her to provide for his household while he studies the Torah (Yeziarska 205). As Denise L. Carmody explains, "When a woman married, she passed to the control of her husband. She was then in effect her husband's property" (Carmody 104). For this reason, though orthodox Jews typically follow the tradition of "early marriage of Israelite girls" Reb Smolinsky refuses to let Bessie go. Furthermore, though the job of an orthodox Jewish husband and father was typically to provide "financial support, medical care, a specific sum of money in the case of divorce or the husband's death, and burial" (Carmody 197), Reb Smolinsky provided none of these for his family, and Bessie picked up the slack. If Bessie married Berel Bernstein, she would no longer be responsible for providing for her father. Bernstein confronts her, telling her to leave her father. He tells her that he cares more for her than her own father because while he has true feelings for her, her "father keeps [her] only for [her] wages" (Yeziarska 49). Though she wants to leave with Berel, the thought of abandoning her father, who has "never worked in his life," keeps her chained in her life of misery and slavery (Yeziarska 50). Though her father does not

appreciate the work she does for him, she knows that if she leaves him without her wages to support him, he will flounder. She worries he will starve. Her father's starvation, however, seems to concern her less than Berel's disrespect towards her father and her lifestyle.

When Berel visits the house, he gets into an argument with Bessie's father because he refuses to pay Bessie's father to compensate for the loss of Bessie's wages; Berel argues that Reb should be glad that he is choosing to marry Bessie without a dowry. He tells Reb that that beautiful, young women with large dowries are after him, but still he wants to marry Bessie because she is a hard worker (Yeziarska 47). The argument gets heated as Berel verbally accosts Reb, arrogantly asking him "Do you know who I am?" (Yeziarska 47). Berel feels entitled to marry Bessie because, essentially, he could find a woman with a rich family who could give him money rather than demanding it from him, as Reb Smolinsky does. The longer the two argue, the more indignant Berel gets, and the more uncomfortable Bessie becomes. He says, "Your father keeps you only for your wages. I would take you without a cent and make yet for you a living. And we would work together for a purpose, to save the dollar" (Yeziarska 49). Bessie cannot respond, but only stands "clenching and unclenching her fingers and staring down on the ground" (Yeziarska 49). Her body language seems to express anger and anxiety; she cannot stand this angry conversation between her father and Berel because they both purport to know what is best for her. While her father robs her of her autonomy by keeping her from marrying Berel, Berel robs her of her autonomy even more as he attempts to create her future for her. He wants to "make for [her] yet a living," meaning that he wants to provide for her. He wants to "work together" with her to live economically, but this entails following his own economic plan and not hers. The benefit of being her family's wage earner is the self-agency it provides her with, and a future with Berel would entail giving up this autonomy to follow his plan for their

lives. In lieu of giving up her agency for Berel, she justifies her rejection of his proposal by claiming that she cannot marry a man who does not respect her father (Yeziarska 51).

In her conversation with Berel, she acknowledges the hard life she leads as she attempts to provide daily bread for her family; but her responses still seem to defend both her father and the lifestyle he has enforced upon her. She tells Berel, “I know I’m a fool. But I cannot help it. I haven’t the courage to live for myself. My own life is knocked out of me. No wonder Father called me the burden bearer” (Yeziarska 50). In this response, she acknowledges her place as her father’s provider, but she also suggests she has no desire to change. Even though remaining her father’s caretaker subsequently ruins her chance of marrying happily and in a timely manner, she simply cannot bring herself to leave him. She understands that her care for him motivates her actions. As Berel loses his temper with her decision and insults her father, she immediately stops crying over his exit from her life and tells him “I couldn’t marry a man that don’t respect my father” (Yeziarska 51). Her father prevents her from fulfilling her only desire, yet she still cares deeply for him and respects him. When she says that she could never marry a man who does not respect her father, it becomes clear that she will always feel this way about her father. The man she marries will have to understand that her relationship with her father is a subverted version of the norm: Bessie is her father’s caretaker instead of the other way around. Because of Bessie’s love for her father, she continues to feel compelled to provide for him over herself. I argue that her habitual practice of self-sacrifice appears to provide her with a kind of fulfillment that spurs her on to continue the demeaning habit.

Though Bessie wants more than anything to be married to Berel Bernstein, her desire seems to stem from the idea that good orthodox Jewish women are meant to marry and serve a

husband. Her father has instilled this ideology in her, telling her that women are worthless without men. Ruth Adler explains that *Yeziarska*

acknowledges how strongly Jewish women yearned to marry, but she also depicts strong-willed women who rejected desirable but prosaic offers of marriage in order to pursue visions of self- fulfillment. (Adler 28)

Though Adler suggests that the “self-fulfillment” sought by women who reject marriage is more desirable, Bessie seems to find fulfillment in providing for her father, despite the fact that it is a highly oppressive task. The combination of the love she feels for her father and the self-agency she is allowed to practice in providing for her family causes her to dedicate more energy to her family than to her own life. Thus, the romantic plot of her relationship with Berel is less important than her development as a caretaker. Lisa Botshon explains that “while *Yeziarska* builds a great deal of tension on the romance plot—Will the woman get her man? — she takes this plot a step further to show that the fantasy marriage does not necessarily fulfill the romantic heroine” (Botshon 234). Though Bessie desires a marriage created from love, and desires an idealistic, domestic life, she refuses the only offer that could give her that kind of lifestyle because to accept the offer would sacrifice both her family ties and her autonomy. She remains faithful to her father in his need. Through this commitment, *Yeziarska* highlights not Bessie’s oppression by the orthodox Jewish patriarchy, but rather her dedication to her familial values and independence. She remains loyal to her father even when she stands to gain nothing; she appears, however, to gain personal fulfillment in the independence she earns by upholding these values. According to Bernadette Rosbrook, Jewish mother characters in *Yeziarska*’s work “have an intense self-respect, they value their autonomy and they yearn for self-expression” (Rosbrook 102). Though her work is a burden, to carry this burden for her father, whom she loves despite

his many flaws, allows Bessie to feel this self-respect, autonomy, and self-expression. Though Bessie's marriage to the fishmonger Zalmon appears to be yet another oppressing demand from her father, her ability to operate independently within Zalmon's household allows her to feel the same feelings of autonomy and love.

## II. Bessie and Zalmon's Children

After the debacle with Berel Bernstein, Bessie's father matches her with Zalmon. Bessie is at first distraught, because Zalmon physically repulses her. A fish peddler of fifty-six years who already has six children by another woman, Zalmon smells like fish and is much older than Bessie, who pleads with her father to find her another match. She repeats, "I hate Zalmon. I hate the smell of fish. If he were the last man on earth, I wouldn't marry him," but her father insists on the marriage (Yeziarska 98). Zalmon, recently widowed, received generous compensation for his wife's death; Reb knows that should Bessie marry Zalmon, this compensation would be bequeathed to him as compensation for parting with Bessie. As losing Bessie would entail losing his primary source of income, Reb cannot fathom finding a better "match" for her. Bessie, on the other hand, is miserable at the prospect of marrying Zalmon. She continues to resist the marriage. When she meets Zalmon's five-year-old son Benny, however, her outlook begins to change. Right away, Bessie falls in love with Benny. He is the only thing that keeps her sane during Zalmon's courtship of her. Zalmon himself realizes the change Benny evokes in Bessie; Benny "seemed to put new life into her. A young, rosy look came into her gray face, as though all the frozen ice in her heart melted in the sunshine of a new spring" (Yeziarska 107). Though Zalmon's old age and fishy smell disgusted her, the prospect of caring for Benny filled her with

the same sense of duty she felt towards caring for her father. While Zalmon himself was self-sufficient and needed no caring for, his children presented Bessie with an opportunity for fulfillment through responsibility similar to the one she shouldered in her father's house. Zalmon's fish business had grown; he tells Reb that "I no more sell from the pushcart. I got a basement store now. And a man to help me" (Yeziarska 92). He does not need Bessie to help him with the store, but he is incapable of taking care of his house and children in addition to his business. He explains to Reb that he wants a wife who can "stay home and cook for me and clean the house and look after the children" (Yeziarska 92). While these responsibilities mirror the stereotypical role of oppressed Jewish women in the household, Bessie would be free to perform these responsibilities in any way she sees fit because Zalmon is always busy with his shop. The opportunity to adopt Benny, whom she loves as her own child, as well as the opportunity to have ownership over her own actions, entices her to marry Zalmon.

She is further enticed into the engagement when she witnesses Zalmon's children's and nanny's inability to care for Benny in his sickness. She realizes how badly they all need a mother's influence and care in their lives. Though she had previously been hesitant to marry Zalmon, when she realized the severity of Benny's illness, "Right back to Zalmon's home she went. Without knocking, she opened the door and walked in" (Yeziarska 109). Yeziarska describes Bessie's brazen entrance into Zalmon's home in a way that illustrates Bessie's confidence in her role as a mother, even though the children are not hers to care for. Her attitude reflects that of her attitude when she was responsible for providing for her father. The work was not pleasant, but it did provide her with a sense of fulfillment. As she cares for Benny, the "Poor little heart" and "Motherless lamb," she feels a similar, even enhanced sense of fulfillment (Yeziarska 109). The prospect of helping Benny and the other children live happier and healthier

lives gives her hope for her future with Zalmon, even though she “shudder[s] from his touch as if a snake had bitten her” (Yeziarska 110). Her willingness to sacrifice her own ideals demonstrates her mother feminist values. She is willing to take up this new burden because she knows that the children need her; even though she may not be happy in her relationship, she will be fulfilled by the mother role that she takes up.

In the end, her role as Benny’s and his siblings’ mother took precedence over her own desire not to marry Zalmon. This too demonstrates her selfless nature—a nature with such pure motivations that it benefits children not biologically her own. Eventually, Bessie “stopped fighting Father in his plans for the marriage” (Yeziarska 110). The resulting mother-child relationship with Benny and Zalmon’s other children make the arrangement a fulfilling, if not an enjoyable, one. On her wedding day, “she went quietly from [her father’s] house to Zalmon’s—the burden bearer had changed her burden” (Yeziarska 110). Though she is never able to reconcile herself with the idea of being Zalmon’s wife, she is able to calmly endure the situation so that she can become Benny’s mother. She chooses motherhood over wifedom, and even over romance. As Carol Stone points out, it is through this situation that Yeziarska is able to “subvert conventional expectations of romance for independent women on the Lower East side in the 1920’s” (5). This subversion, however, does not necessitate a negative reading. Instead of marrying Zalmon because she loves Zalmon, she marries him because she loves his children. She prefers motherhood to wifedom, and even to romance. Though Bessie’s life as a mother of six raggedy children by no means lives up to a romantic ideal of marriage or maternity, her occupation as Zalmon’s children’s adopted mother is an honorable one. Yeziarska gives her “the dignity of fulfillment and respectability” (Stone 5). In the scene when Bessie takes care of Benny’s food poisoning alongside the doctor, Benny asks her, “Mother— are you my mother?”

and wraps his arms around her (Yeziarska 110). In this moment, the reader is reconciled with the idea of Bessie's marriage to Zalmon just as Bessie herself is. No longer portrayed as a victim, Bessie is depicted as a strong woman who chooses to care for those who need it and finds fulfillment in adopting this duty. It is in this choice that her mother feminist values are evident. Marrying Zalmon seems to mean locking herself into a fate of male oppression, but she takes the risk because she knows that ensuring a better future for his children will empower her.

Since Bessie does not truly love Zalmon, she could choose merely to reside in his home with his children without deeply caring for them. Though they have grown used to living without a mother or any semblance of disciplinary structure, she still wishes to teach them to live in more "civilized" ways. As they all scramble to wash themselves in the sink at the same time during the morning, she laments, "*Oi, oi, oi!* Every morning I'm yelling at them. 'Wash yourself two at a time.' But they all rush together like wild animals. In our house we also had only one sink, but we didn't kill each other to be first" (Yeziarska 143). Though the children act "like wild animals" every morning, she still attempts to change their behavior. She knows that civility is possible for these children, and though they have yet to heed her advice, still she works each morning to form their behavior. This provides a stark contrast for the parenting that Zalmon has provided for them after the death of his first wife. When he hears them rushing about the house, he yells, "Devils! Stop this, or I'll break the bones in your bodies and kick you out in the street" (Yeziarska 143). While it is unlikely that Zalmon would actually hurt his children or exile them from his home, he offers no real corrective to his children's behavior. By contrast, Bessie personally agonizes over their bad behavior and tries to steer them into better conduct. Just as when Benny got sick and Bessie knew that she had to stay to help the children, Bessie sees their morning "routine" behavior and knows that without her help, these children will not learn how to

properly function in society. For the children to grow up without a proper mother figure to teach them how to become successful adults, Bessie seems to believe, would be a tragedy. Their current behavior baffles her, and she remarks to Sara, “In our house we also had only one sink, but we didn’t kill each other to be first” (Yeziarska 143). She sounds irked, but she continues to correct them morning after morning nonetheless. She does not love Zalmon, so he does not provide her with motivation to teach them. Her motivation comes from an altruistic care for the children who cannot care for themselves, but also from her ability to dictate what the children should do. She instructs them “every morning” that they should wash themselves “two at a time,” and even though she has to repeat herself each morning, she perseveres. She seems to enjoy being able to instruct them in this way, and the relationship mutually benefits both sides.

### III. Bessie In Comparison to Sara

Though Bessie’s path is an admirable one, it can be argued that it is not a feminist one, especially when viewed comparatively to the path taken by her sister Sara. From the beginning of the novel when Sara, only a child, peddles herring to bring in money to support her family, she shows her desire to become an independent and successful adult. As Lisa Marcus points out, becoming independent, or “making for herself a person,” is of utmost importance to Sara, “and personhood is clearly aligned here with the ability to leave the domestic space of the family in order to make a profit in the new world” (Marcus 167). For Sara, independence means pursuing a career without the help of men. She even says that “in America, women don’t need men to boss them,” and continues to identify herself as an American woman (Yeziarska 137). As an American woman, she refuses to adhere to her father’s teaching or comply with his matchmaking

skills and instead pursues an education and career as a teacher. In declaring her independence, “she weds herself to what she imagines to be a New World anti-patriarchal ideology that promises freedom from the constricted lives her mother and sisters have been coerced into living because of religion, tradition, and the Old World— all lined up neatly as anti-modern and anti-woman” (Marcus 170). In spite of her father’s anti-feminist sentiments she pursues her career passionately. After she rejects the match he makes for her, he delivers a rage-filled lecture in which he tells her she will never be anything but an old maid who cannot make a difference in society:

Pfui on your education! What’s going to be your end? A dried up old maid? You think you can make over the world? You think millions of educated old maids like you could change the world one inch? Woe to America where women are let free like men.

(Yeziarska 205)

Instead of this discouraging Sara, however, her father’s lecture only inspires her to leave her home and pursue her own dreams and her own “match.” By the end of the novel, after numerous struggles, Sara becomes a successful teacher married to a Jewish male administrator of her school. In light of the traditional view of what a feminist “should” look like, Sara seems to fit the description much more perfectly than her sister Bessie. Unlike Bessie, all Sara’s personal goals are accomplished with almost no regard to the impact her decisions might have on those around her.

I argue, however, that Bessie’s character can be viewed as an equally successful feminist. Bessie’s feminism emerges in her resisting the normal emotional path of women in her same situation. Typically, in Jewish American fiction, explains Evelyn Gross Avery, female characters that do not reach a satisfactory stage of independence like “Sara Smolinsky [, who] determinedly

combined marriage and career,” eventually “become bitter, assailing men and their heritage” (Avery 49). Bessie, after her forced marriage to Zalmon, is expected to follow down this path to bitterness and hatred of men. However, she resists this fate by instead finding fulfillment in her new children. She tells Sara, “Many times I wanted to run like you... But there’s Benny.” (Yeziarska 143). Bessie cannot help herself but to stay when she sees Benny suffering. She sees the possible future that awaits them should she leave them to Zalmon’s discretion, and her altruistic nature cannot allow them to be subject to this possible future. By her own volition, Bessie decides to take these children’s futures into her own hands by teaching them proper manners and behavior. While she takes up the role of mother out of the goodness of her own heart, she also benefits from the mother-child relationship because it grants her the same sense of autonomy she had when she was the bread winner for her father.

Bessie’s efforts to help everyone in her life, including her father, Zalmon’s children, and especially Sara, demonstrate her altruism, but they also demonstrate her desire to act as the provider because of the sense of independence it gives her. She actively places herself, or allows herself to remain in, situations that allow her this kind of self-rule. When Sara decides to leave home, she stays with Bessie for a night as she tries to figure out her next steps. While there, she witnesses first-hand Bessie’s freedom in her involvement with her adopted children. Upon Sara’s arrival, Bessie’s “burden-bearer” nature immediately makes itself known when she allows Sara to spend the night at her house even though she has absolutely no room to do so. Zalmon tells her Sara must return home immediately because “A girl’s place is under her father’s hand” (Yeziarska 141). Zalmon’s statement is misogynistic and reflects the patriarchal dominance present in orthodox Jewish culture, but Bessie and Sara take offense to it because of their strained relationship with their overbearing and economically abusive father. Bessie sees the

danger in the situation and decidedly places herself between Sara and her insensitive husband, saying only “It’s too late to go back tonight” (Yeziarska 141). In other words, even here Bessie shows her protective nurturing self, guarding her sister despite her husband’s wishes. She sees that Sara, who had the courage to leave their father outright to pursue her own life, has the ability to prosper in her independence. I argue that though Bessie herself chooses not to do the same, she is willing to help Sara in her journey. In the following conversation between the sisters, Bessie’s self-sacrificial support is demonstrated:

“What happened?” [Bessie] whispered, slipping her hand into mine.

“Father. I couldn’t stand him any longer.”

“Thank God you had the courage to break away. If I’d had your sense, I wouldn’t have sunk into Zalmon’s fish wife.” (Yeziarska 142)

Bessie admits that had she been courageous enough to stand up to her father, she would not be in her current situation. When she hears that Sara has bravely defied her father, her response is “Thank God you had the courage to break away” (Yeziarska 142). She then shares her home with Sara for the night, and even offers her breakfast in the morning. Though she cannot offer much, she offers everything she can. Bessie fully supports her sister emotionally and physically in her endeavor for independence even though it cannot directly benefit Bessie herself. This is not altogether surprising because the two share such a close sisterhood. Bessie’s actions illustrate, even more than the strength of their sisterhood, her passion for investing in the bettering of others’ lives that defines her sense of self.

Traditionally, Sara is accepted as the feminist in the family, even though the end of the novel seems to disprove this idea. At the end of the novel, for instance, Sara decides to take her father into her own home, despite the arguments that might ensue between him and her husband

and the strain it might place on her marriage. She explains, “A longing to see Father came over me. What had happened to him in all those months? I could stifle my conscience no longer... I had to see what I could do for him” (Yeziarska 282). She invites him to live in her home, even though this means she will live under “the tyranny with which he tried to crush me as a child” (Yeziarska 295). Despite his horrendous treatment of her throughout her childhood, she cannot help but demonstrate her love for her father by inviting him into her home in his time of need. Her desire to care for her father despite the undesirability of the circumstances which the task incurs demonstrates that she has the same values that Bessie shaped her life around. She is altruistic and cares deeply enough for her loved ones to sacrifice her own happiness to help them. Though Sara brings her father home, she is still considered to be a strong feminist. Bringing her father, the ultimate misogynist, to live with her and impart his sexist knowledge on her once again does not seem to be an empowering choice for Sara, but still she is considered the feminist in the family. Bessie, on the other hand, accepts a marriage that allows her to provide monetarily for her father, but also allows her to be physically away from him. Yet Bessie is rarely considered to be a feminist. I believe that both women are strong and active feminists, but they choose to demonstrate their ideologies in different ways. While Bessie finds her autonomy within the domestic sphere by providing for those she loves, Sara finds hers in achieving her personal goals with little regard to others. Neither approach to feminism is incorrect, and in their methods, both women are empowered by the end of the novel.

While Sara is always acknowledged as a feminist, Bessie’s categorization as a feminist is a more revolutionary revelation. Bessie—her father’s burden bearer, forced to marry a man she does not love because of the monetary recompensation he can provide for her father—is not typically understood to be a feminist. She fits perfectly within the description of a mother

feminist, though, because of these attributes. As she bears her father's burden and gives him all of her wages, she is motivated by love. When she agrees to marry Zalmon, her decision is motivated by pity and care for his children who live without a mother's care. In this light, her decisions can be labeled truly as decisions rather than forced existences. Because this is the case, and Bessie lives willingly in the manner she does, serving those around her, her actions do not demonstrate her oppression, but her autonomy. Bessie is empowered by her decisions. Caring for others allows her to practice a kind of freedom that none of her other sisters experience. Her actions benefit others, so no one questions them; she is permitted to act as she sees fit. Her combined concern for those she loves along with her desire to experience freedom allow her to be categorized as a mother feminist. She aims both to experience personal freedom as well as provide for those she loves, and the two motivations together create a dynamic that allow her to function as both a domestic provider and an empowered woman, the essence of what a mother feminist.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Faith: A Modern Portrait of Mother Feminism

In the previous chapters, I have shown that for Bessie and Dora children are of the highest importance. Even in their relationships outside their own family, Bessie and Dora demonstrate a dedication to their family. Regardless of the personal sacrifice required, each mother wants the best for her children. In the end, their personal happiness is less important than the happiness of their children. Like Bessie and Dora, Grace Paley's character Faith, who appears in "Two Sad Short Stories from a Long and Happy Life" and several other stories as well, is also completely invested in her children. Just as Bessie is willing to endure her marriage with Zalmon in order to ensure the wellbeing of his children, Faith endures discomfort in her relationships with current and former husbands in order to ensure that her sons have a father figure. Like Dora, she sustains personal loss and inconvenience in order to accommodate her children. Faith's point of view, however, is different from both Bessie and Dora because she is a second-generation Jewish immigrant. While both Bessie and Dora deal with absolute patriarchal power ruling their lives, Faith is able to enjoy more autonomy. Her autonomy, however, is slightly undermined by the responsibility of taking care of her children. Such responsibility removes her ability to fight for her own complete freedom. Rather than blame her children for such limitations, however, she loves them unconditionally, both because of her Jewish roots and simply because they are her children. Rather than reject motherhood as a burden, she instead searches for an innovative method of supporting feminism while still working as a full-time mother. For this reason, I argue that Faith illustrates Paley's interest in the concept of mother feminism. Because it is widely accepted that the character of Faith is largely autobiographical, I turn to the author herself before exploring Faith further.

Grace Paley, born in America to Jewish immigrant parents, was a radical pacifist, socialist, and feminist whose “politics are... deeply rooted in a family past where memories were still fresh of Tsarist oppression” (Newman 2). Paley uses her own political background to inform Faith’s character. Through Faith, Paley creates a character who is motivated to advocate for gender equality and pacifism. One of Faith’s most notable characteristics is the importance she places on motherhood and caring for her sons despite other agendas that may be more enticing. As a Jewish mother in the modern world, Faith faces unique challenges and choices, but the basic value of family remains her top priority. The duality of being both a feminist and a pacifist, as well as a mother and a human rights activist, informs much of her fiction, not just the Faith stories. For instance, “In This Country, But in Another Language, My Aunt Refuses to Marry the Men Everyone Wants Her To,” she writes, “Don’t carry the main flag. When you’re bigger, you’ll be in a demonstration or a strike or something. It doesn’t have to be you, let someone else” (Paley 323). In the original manuscript<sup>1</sup> of this story, however, Paley had written simply, “Don’t carry the flag.” In the published version the aunt cautions against carrying the “main flag.” This change allows Paley to voice her preference for a softer, but still effective, version of advocacy. A woman need not participate in picket lines, sit-ins, or other forms of protest that may result in injury to the participants in order to make her voice heard. A woman’s choice to sit out of these physical protests does not lessen her ability to advocate for equality. When the aunt character cautions her niece not to carry the “main flag,” she cautions her against leading the feminist movement on the front line by participating in “a demonstration or a strike or something.” Fighting physically for equality for women, while admirable was also dangerous. Her aunt does not advise her not to do her part for the movement, but merely to “let someone else” to the physical work. While this may seem a cowardly suggestion, this aunt realizes the peril intrinsic

in fighting for civil rights and advises her niece not to be a front runner. She never tells her, however, not to support feminism. The aunt herself, as a woman who “will not marry who everyone wants her to,” is herself pushing for her own equality and freedom to marry whomever she would like (or no one at all). Though she resists the system, she avoids the physical danger that a demonstration or strike would place her in.

Paley herself was unafraid of the physical danger caused by fighting for civil rights. She was an active rebel who “accompanied American POWs home from Hanoi, [was] arrested on the White House Lawn, [and] dragged off in shackles to serve time in the Greenwich Village Women's House of Detention,” (Newman 2). She was ready to make any sacrifice to achieve equality for women and marginalized people groups. This is exactly the kind of active fighting that the aunt in the previously mentioned story warned her niece against. She was trying to protect her niece from being “dragged off” to a detention center. Like the aunt, Faith too advocates for a softer, but nonetheless effective, method of activism. This “softer” form of activism, I argue, belongs to Paley’s mother feminism. Such feminism, I argue, asks her not to carry the “main flag.” This does not mean she must refrain from carrying a flag completely. But as a mother, her method of rebelling against the patriarchy requires her to act in a different arena, the world of child-rearing. Not coincidentally, Faith is the mother of sons. To fulfill her role as a mother to her sons she can resist the patriarchy by positively influencing her sons to reject misogyny. Her investment of love and time in their lives despite the inconvenience it may cause illustrates mother feminism perfectly because it shows that she perseveres through adversity to raise her sons as feminists. In so doing, she will begin changing the world.

Similar mother feminism is also visible through the hand-inked stream of thoughts scribbled in the margins of her manuscripts of the story “Ruthy and Edie,” which only briefly

mentions Faith. As published in “The Collected Stories,” Paley ends “Ruthy and Edie” with a touching scene in which Ruthy holds her granddaughter Letty, and “it seem[s] to Ruth that she’d better hold her even closer, because, though no one else seemed to notice—Letty, rosy and soft-cheeked as ever, was falling, already falling, falling out of her brand-new hammock of world-inventing words onto the hard floor of man-made time” (Paley 334). Paley’s manuscripts reveal that this scene was only added after at least three still-existing drafts. In the earlier drafts, the story ended with Ann’s call to “go forth with fear and courage and rage to save the world” (Paley 334). In what I take to be one of Paley’s first manuscripts, because it is marked with more corrections than any other copy, she ends the story in this way: “They all agreed after several years of busyness because of a divorce, a grandchild, a dead parent, they begin to gather with others in order (before it was too late) to go forth as they had when young with fear and rage to save the world” (Folder 1.14). This ending leaves the reader with a feeling that Ruthy and her friends were ready to fight to make a change in the world. It leaves out the altruism and kindness that informs what I am calling mother feminism. This first ending has the characters deciding to pursue equality with the same “fear” and “rage” they had when they were young. Yet it could also mean that they have decided to participate in similar demonstrations now that they are mothers which might endanger themselves. While these demonstrations are undoubtedly effective, they are, in a way, selfish. For instance, I define altruistic mother feminist actions as those which are intended to ensure results for their children even if there is no direct effect on the woman taking the action herself. The final published ending of this story seems to adhere to that definition. Other critics agree. For instance, Volkman explains that Paley’s goal in writing is to create for children an “open destiny” that “is free of violence” (Volkman 565). The published ending, therefore, by illustrating this tender moment between grandmother and granddaughter,

shows that sometimes the most effective activism a matriarchal figure can engage in is loving her children, or in this case grandchildren. It is clear to the reader of the published version that, in this final moment, Ruthy would do anything to keep her granddaughter from harm's way. The published version is, in fact, longer and adds more detail, than the initial drafts. Jacqueline Taylor explains that Paley's short stories are often accused "of such brevity that they sometimes seem to be seeking the minimal limits of the genre," so her addition of this scene, which adds a page to her story, enforces its significance even further (Taylor 20). That Paley intentionally lengthened the story, I believe, can be attributed to the fact that she wanted to demonstrate the importance of the power of a loving matriarchal figure. This same theme can be found in other stories involving Faith and her children, where a similar kind of activism through love is visible. In these stories, Faith dedicates her life to her children's happiness no matter the detriment it causes to her own life; she loves them completely and invests in their potential to change their future for the better.

Even when Faith suffers from a stiflingly male family dynamic, she retains her mother feminism. In an iconic story about Faith, her former and current husbands, and her two sons, "Two Sad Short Stories from a Long and Happy Life," nothing can rob her of her own mother feminist tendencies. The story is broken into two sections, the first called "The Used-Boy Raisers," and the second is called "A Subject of Childhood." In both sections, Faith's primary problems stem from the fact that two men want to be part of raising her sons. In "The Used-Boy Raisers," Faith's ex-husband (her sons' biological father) remarks to her current husband that, though he loves his sons, "Faith is their mother and now Faith is your wife. I'm so much away. If you want to think of them as yours, old man, go ahead" (Paley 81). Faith's ex-husband, Pallid, travels often and is unable to take any real responsibility for his sons; he tries to pawn off this

responsibility to Faith's new husband, Livid, by masking it in a positive light. When Pallid tells Faith's new husband that he can "think of them as his" he shows the "marked difference between 'mother' and 'father' culture," as Anna Bagnari labels it (Bagnari 68). Paley shows that it is acceptable for a father to pass on the responsibility of caring for his children. To make this point, Bagnari recalls that Paley herself asserted that when she was growing up "mostly nobody had fathers" (Bagnari 67). The implication is that while fathers can come and go, a mother is not permitted to do so. In this story, such is the case. Worse, the fathers still claim their authority to raise the children despite their frequent absences. Faith for instance is often left out of important conversations regarding their upbringing. For example, later in the conversation between Faith's husbands, Pallid warns Livid that "if I ever hear they've come within an inch of that [Catholic] church, I'll run you through" (Paley 83). In this exchange concerning the religious upbringing of the children, Faith, the mother and primary caretaker of her sons, is completely excluded. She muses to herself that this is because "I rarely express my opinion on any serious matter but only live out my destiny, which is to be, until my expiration date, laughingly the servant of man" (Paley 85). As Minako Baba explains, "the glaringly dehumanizing phrase 'my expiration date' and the mock-subservient tone of the phrase 'laughingly the servant of man' are ultimately conducive to rejecting conventional sex-role expectations," even though they only occur as thoughts in Faith's head (Baba 41). Faith often keeps her opinion to herself during conversations between the two men in her life because they only see her as a woman who cooks and does housework; they ignore or do not see the woman who invests her time in raising their children. When she brings attention to her silence and her destiny to serve these men until she dies, she exhibits her mother feminism. Despite its lack of force, her voice as a mother still undermines the voices of the men around her for the reader.

To the men, her former husbands, her voice is “powerless,” but I argue that it actually shows her strength. Bagnari explains that she “considers Faith’s powerless and unique voice as opposing the naming, controlling, hierarchical voice of the Father” (Bagnari 69). Faith is not allowed to express herself verbally to Livid and Pallid, but the strength found in her actions does demonstrate that strength in voice does not always indicate strength in actions. Livid and Pallid certainly have strong voices and state their views often. Yet they do not care for the children in the same way that Faith does; Pallid only complains about how Faith’s sons “can’t read a tinker’s damn” while Livid contemplates what he would do if “they were [his] sons in actuality as they are in everyday life” (Paley 83). Meanwhile, as they talk, Faith remains busy quietly making more coffee and washing dishes (Paley 83). Ultimately, the story makes clear that only through their mother does any real change occur for these boys. After all, it is Faith who is raising the two sons while her husbands spend the majority of their time away working. In this way, Faith is identified with other Jewish mother characters who, “secluded from the world of men, their lives pivoting around serving them, being deserted by them and rearing children... express their alienation through understatement” (Bagnari 70). Instead of lashing out at her husbands for the trouble they cause her, Faith quietly performs her duties to her children and her household. This silence demonstrates fortitude in her motherhood. She does not allow the ineptitude of her husbands’ fathering to affect the way she interacts with her children or to prevent her from caring about her household. She simply carries out her responsibilities, regardless of her own feelings toward them. The husbands are weak because they talk but do not act; Faith acts, even though she does not often verbalize her opinions, which demonstrates both self control and strength.

At the end of this section of the story, Faith offers insight into the difference between her life and her husbands’ lives as she plans out her day, and her thoughts reflect the duality of her

attitude towards motherhood. Rather than lapse into angry despair, she focuses on the positive to make the best of her own situation knowing that she is unable to change it. Though her language makes it seem as though she envies the freedom her husbands have, it also functions to demonstrate the way she relishes the time spent and activities done with her sons. Thinking of her husbands' freedom she says: "at last clean and neat, rather attractive, shiny men in their thirties, with grand affairs of the day ahead of them. Dark night, the search for pleasure and oblivion were well ahead" (Paley 87). She watches as they "set off in pride on paths which are not [her] concern" (Paley 87). Baba asserts that these words "convey an ambivalent sense of envious admiration for and aversive repudiation of the men's sphere" (Baba 42). In other words, as Faith watches her "attractive" and "shiny" husbands take off in search of "pleasure and oblivion," she seems to put them on a pedestal on which she desires to have a place. Their lives seem easy because they live only to please themselves, and Faith knows that their work is "not her concern." Yet this language also reflects Faith's sense of pride in the fact that she chooses to focus on her children, whom she loves, and who are solely her concern. Baba implies this view when she explains that Faith's list of activities planned for the day with her children includes "dinosaurs in the morning, park in the afternoon, peanut butter in between, and at the end of it all, to reward us for a week of beans endured, a noble rib roast with little onions, dumplings, and pink applesauce" (Paley 86). This ending seems to announce her distaste for the male world and her affection for her role as a mother. According to Baba, Faith's "words sound like a defiant declaration of the preciousness of domesticity and motherhood" (Baba 42). She openly declares that her job as a mother is incredibly important. Though at times she may long for the freedom of the male lifestyle and their kind of work, Faith makes plain in this story that her work as a

mother is both fulfilling and necessary, and while her husbands have to “search” for their day’s fulfillment, she readily accepts hers from her children.

Because her husbands offer no respite from her struggles within the household, Faith often relies on her sons to give her affirmation. This dependence on their reactions demonstrates Faith’s need to keep her children content, even when it is inconvenient for her. Such dependence is a major theme in the second story in “Two Sad Short Stories of a Long and Happy Life” entitled “A Subject of Childhood.” There, Richard and Tonto, Faith’s sons, and Clifford, her husband, injure themselves in a play fight. Though Faith had nothing to do with the fight or the injuries, Clifford blames her in the following conversation:

“Do you mean it’s my fault you all got hurt?”

‘No doubt about it, Faith, you’ve done a rotten job.’ ‘Rotten job?’ I said.

‘Lousy,’ he said.

I gave him one more chance. ‘Lousy?’ I asked.

‘Oh my God! Stinking!’ he said.” (Paley 91).

Though the passage is humorous to the reader, it illustrates seriously how Faith’s own husband will not affirm her performance as a mother, forcing her to seek reassurance from her sons. Despite the constant annoyance they cause her, they also supply her with the reassurance she needs. For example, Faith’s youngest son Tonto crawls into her lap and exclaims, “I’m never gonna go away. I’m gonna stay right next to you forever, Faith... I love you, Mama” (Paley 95-96). Though only a few paragraphs before Faith had begged Tonto to go play outside with his brother and leave her alone for ten minutes of peace, this tender moment melts her heart because Tonto is not just Faith’s son, but also a boy who will grow into a man. By investing her time and

love in Tonto, Faith is teaching him how not to be like his father. She is, through her relationship with her son, forming a new, less sexist future.

Before he snuggles up to her, Faith initially wants her son to leave her alone and give her some peace. She pleads with him, “despairing of solitary minute. “Why can’t you go play with Richard? You’ll have fun” (Paley 95). As virtually the only caretaker of two sons under the age of eight, Faith craves and cherishes any alone time she can get. Utterly frustrated, she desires nothing more than to be rid of her responsibilities to her sons. Notably, Faith hides her inner feelings from her son. Instead, Faith remains outwardly positive. I believe this is another demonstration of her mother feminism. It is, she believes, what her role as a mother demands of her. Despite her desire to rid herself of the child clinging to her, she remains nurturing in her tone of voice. She “gently” tells him to go outside to play with his brother (Paley 95). She tries to compromise with him by encouraging him to spend time in his room. Despite her irritation, she calls him “honey,” (Paley 95). For all her frustration, I note that she does not raise her voice or physically punish him. In fact, when he crawls into her lap and attaches himself to her, she gives in, and uses the moment to dote on him:

“I held him so and rocked him. I cradled him. I closed my eyes and leaned on his dark head. But the sun in its course emerged... and suddenly shone white and bright on me. Then through the short fat fingers of my son, interred forever, like a black-and-white-barred king in Alcatraz, my heart lit up in stripes.” (Paley 96).

I believe this cheerful and caring manner exhibited even when she least feels like being cheerful and caring demonstrates her true dedication to her children. In “An Old Discussion about Feminism and Judaism: Faith and Renewal in Grace Paley’s Short Fiction,” Victoria Aarons demonstrates the connection between this cheerful demeanor and mothers’ desire to create a

better world for their children. Aarons notes that Faith “attempts to transcend her generation’s history and the history of generations before her” by bringing about change in the mundane aspects of her daily routine, which is a common trait that “characterize[s] Paley’s narrators, primarily Paley’s women characters whose determined optimism controls the discursive measure of their lives” (218). In other words, it is Faith’s desire to move past her own history and help to enact her own hopeful vision for the future that demands her positivity in her role as a mother. By approaching her daily tasks with outward optimism, she teaches her sons about positivity and perseverance. Her perseverance for her sons’ sake is what makes her a mother feminist. In a less optimistic reading of this story, Gloria L. Cronin argues that Faith is an “angry Jewish divorcée struggling to keep her family together” (143). By contrast, I assert, like Aarons, that while Faith’s situation leads to her anger, her positivity supersedes that anger. For her children, she demonstrates a positivity in hope for the future.

Such positivity is also, I argue, a form of social activism. For instance, Daniel Chaskes notes that “while Paley’s texts repeatedly affirm the need for new alternatives of human understanding and partnership... that possibility is here expressed through child-rearing” (151). In this respect, a mother’s love, especially in the lives of male children, is imperative because it develops in them a new mindset for approaching relationships in the future. Through this kind of training of young males, “the labor of raising children becomes a force of moral good, and, most importantly... and antidote to the fated destructiveness [of the current male-female dynamic in society]” (Chaskes 152). To Chaskes insight I add that here, Faith is demonstrating the power of mother feminism as itself a form of social activism. Through it, Faith begins the process of improving society for future generations. She does this by rearing her own male children to be not only tolerant men, but supportive of females. Though she herself has not experienced any

positive reinforcement from the men in her life, training her sons to treat women equally is Faith's way of sparking the practice of all men treating women equally.

Faith's goal to instill ideals of gender equality in her sons is not one easily achieved, but she perseveres towards it in spite of her personal struggles. Her husbands constantly diminish her importance by verbally insulting her parenting style. They talk over her head about their sons as if she does not exist and is not the boys' primary caregiver. Paley frames these obstacles in a humorous light, but the implication is not to be taken lightly. Faith represents the way women are treated as inferior to men, but because Faith has a fiery will, she is not downtrodden by this poor treatment. In fact, she sees the men's talk as inconsequential to her own life because it is not backed up by actions. Though the husbands talk as though they plan to make decisions about the boys' lives, they do not care for the boys on a daily basis. In fact, they are absent most of the time. Faith knows she has full control of the boys upbringing, and she takes full advantage of this fact. Though her own situation is less than desirable, as she constantly has to deal with the empty blathering of her two husbands, she perseveres because she loves her sons. She knows they need male role models, even if those role models are not of the best quality. When the men leave, however, Faith takes advantage of their absence by instilling in her sons the value of gender equality. She determinedly remains positive about the future in the presence of her sons because she understands that they have the opportunity to change it for the better. As she selflessly works to improve the future to benefit her sons and their generation, she embodies the traits of a mother feminist.

## Notes

1. In the Harry Ransom Center, Paley's manuscripts are archived and available to the public. In these manuscripts, drafts of her stories, printed by a typewriter, are hand-edited by Paley herself. Thanks to funding donated by the Drapeau Center for Undergraduate Research at the University of Southern Miss, I was given the opportunity to visit the Harry Ransom Center to research Paley's works in the archives. For a week I spent my days perusing Paley's manuscripts, attempting to delve meaning from her notes and personal musings. In this chapter of my thesis, I present some of the research uncovered during my time at the Center.



## Conclusion

In Jewish American literature, women who practice orthodox Judaism are often seen as institutionally oppressed by the patriarchy. Left out of the ceremonial practices of their religion, they dutifully accept their “sacred calling” as mothers. Upon answering this sacred calling, these Jewish mothers pour all their efforts into raising their children and ensuring their children’s future happiness. While scholars often regard Jewish mothers as overbearing and controlling, this stereotype overlooks their underlying motivation: these mothers fiercely love their children. Though at times their actions seem controlling, their actions stem from their desire to see their children be content. They want to make sure their children have an even better life than they themselves have, and they are willing to sacrifice any personal comforts or aspirations necessary to see this happen. In this thesis, I analyzed three Jewish mother characters who demonstrate this intense love for their children.

Dora, in Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*, sacrifices her personal happiness to ensure the happiness of her daughter. Though her relationship with David Levinsky makes her happy, the happiness of her daughter Lucy is more important. She ends her involvement with David but continues to invest in Lucy’s reading and writing skills and table manners so that one day she might marry a man with whom she is truly in love. This demonstrates Dora’s true love for her daughter as well as her selflessness. Dora would rather ensure Lucy’s happiness than her own, but I claim that her actions also are empowering rather than demeaning. She bolsters Lucy’s sense of autonomy by sacrificing her own desires so that one day Lucy may have the choice to act upon hers.

Similarly, Bessie adopts the six children of her new husband and attempts to instill in them values that will ensure their success in the future. Although she grew up in a house where

she was forced to provide for her father, a fact often interpreted as a form of oppression, Bessie enjoyed providing for her family because it gave her a sense of self-agency. Though she does not love her husband, her marriage to him allows her to feel this same sense of autonomy as she raises his children while he works at his store. Though her autonomy is a benefit of her actions, her primary intentions when adopting the children are inherently altruistic. When she sees Benny is sick, her first instinct is to care for him until he is well. Even though he is not her biological child, she cares for him deeply; she wants the best for him. As she invests in his and his siblings' future, she finds herself fulfilled by her work in such a way that her sacrifices can be viewed as acts of empowerment rather than acts of succumbing to patriarchal expectations.

Faith while raising her sons also refuses to conform to her husband and ex-husband's expectations of her decisions. The story I analyzed focuses on their arguments about the boys as both husbands feel entitled to make important decisions regarding her sons. At the end of the story, however, when the husbands leave Faith's apartment, she is once again left alone with her sons, free to raise them however she wants. In this story, the fathers are absent in their sons lives, and though they have opinions on the way the sons should be raised, Faith ignores them because she knows that she has freedom to do so. When her husbands leave, she knows they have to search for their fulfillment, while she finds hers in raising and loving her sons.

Each of these Jewish mother characters sacrifices to ensure their children's happiness because they love them deeply. I argued that their sacrifices do not reflect the oppression of the patriarchy, but rather their personal decision to place their children's future before their own. To categorize these women as oppressed rather than empowered is to rob them of the hard-earned autonomy they gained through motherhood. As each woman invests her time and effort into ensuring her child's happiness, she chooses to abandon her personal happiness in hopes that she

not only ensures the happiness of her own child, but also that she passes down her values to that child in hopes that they do the same. In these instances, motherhood and feminism are not mutually exclusive, but easily reconcilable. The Jewish mother characters in these novels demonstrate a fiery dedication to equality of women in the future by voicing and acting on their advocacy in their relationship with their children.

In academic conversation about these three works, the general consensus of scholars seems to be that each of these three women characters are oppressed by the patriarchy. While in some respects, the characters' roles in their respective novels are brought about by the oppression of the patriarchy, their importance is reduced when they themselves are reduced as the product of their own oppression. Instead, by reading against the grain, one may interpret these characters as empowered women.

As women in the modern world fight for gender equality, it seems counterintuitive to allow female characters in literature to continue to be defined by their involvement with the patriarchy. If a female character is only as valuable as the affect the patriarchy has on her, then she holds little value as a character. Each of these characters, however, exhibits much more depth than the "oppressed" title gives them credit for. Each of them sacrifice their own goals willingly to help their children succeed in life. They know their future is set in stone, but they want their children to be happy in a way that they themselves could not be. Because they love their children, they are willing to take any step necessary to ensure this happiness. While this seems to be the result of oppression, and their sacrifices seem to function only as devices that oppress them further, I simply cannot understand the characters in this way. By granting them with the status of autonomy, their actions can be read as willingly-made sacrifices motivated by a mother's love. This empowers the characters; they become more than a product of the male

influence in their world. They themselves are viewed as influencers of the world as they work through their children to improve society. In order for these female characters to remain relevant to modern society, it is imperative that they are recovered as independently important characters.

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