

Yahweh vs. the Teraphim: Jacob's Pagan Wives in Thomas Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers* and in Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*.

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Abstract

This essay deals with two retellings of Genesis: Thomas Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers* and Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*. Both authors note the presence of implicit pagan tendencies among the women of Jacob's clan (Gen 31:19; 35:2) and develop this subtext for their respective ideological purposes. Thomas Mann creates a dichotomy between the backwardness of the pagan female realm and the progressive nature of the monotheistically-oriented patriarchs. The path toward modern humanist values comes from the likes of Jacob and Joseph rather than Rachel and Leah in Mann's novel. Anita Diamant, on the other hand, adopts the opposite attitude, namely, that the paganism of Rachel, Leah, as well as other women in Jacob's family, is a humane and natural form of spirituality in contrast to the bloodthirsty Yahwism of Jacob and his sons. The latter point is illustrated by the sacking of Shechem. In order to question the patriarchal stance of the Old Testament Diamant reverses the key values informing the theology of the Bible. Thus, in *The Red Tent* Jacob's wives venerate the Ashera in particular. The latter constitutes a challenge to the stance of the Deuteronomic History where the cult of the Ashera is viewed as a key reason behind God's decision to let the Babylonians destroy the Southern Kingdom of Judah. And since Mann's novel upholds the patriarchal spirit of the biblical text, Diamant enters into debate with the continuity of female disempowerment which reaches all the way from Genesis to *Joseph and his Brothers*.

Introduction

In Genesis Jacob's wives Rachel and Leah, along with his concubines Zilpah and Bilhah, are associated with the climax of the Patriarchal Narrative (Gen 12-50). While Abraham plants the seeds of Judaism and Isaac tends to the seedlings, Jacob harvests the spiritual crop by literally *making* a people to go with the new religion. And this can only take place through Jacob's wives who bear the twelve tribes of Israel, thereby giving monotheism its first congregation. Therefore, the women around Jacob appear as nothing short of epically significant in the national foundation of Yahwism. And yet, how Yahwistic are they? Although the question might seem odd on first glance, one should consider where the matriarchs come from. Rachel and Leah, as well as Zilpah and Bilhah, are presented in the biblical text as having been born and raised in Haran, i.e., not in Palestine but in northern Mesopotamia (Gen: 29). Although Jacob goes there and joins the young women, there is no reason to assume that his consorts' culture suddenly changes — all the more so because Yahweh does not reveal himself to Jacob's wives (the way he does

to Jacob) and “educate” them about Yahwism. Why then should we expect Rachel and Leah — or Bilhah and Zilpah for that matter — to abandon their Mesopotamian pantheon, whatever the four women’s biological role may be in the forging of the Yahwistic project (cf. S. Teubal: 97 and I. Sheres: 135)?

There are two pericopes in Genesis suggesting that Jacob’s entourage has not given up its pagan beliefs. First, Genesis 31:19 tells us that Rachel steals Laban’s household gods (teraphim) as Jacob’s family prepares to flee from Laban’s house. Although we are not given an explicit account of Rachel’s motivation for this act of filial disloyalty, the implicit meaning can be interpreted as follows: Rachel wants the escape to succeed and steals the teraphim in order to hinder Laban’s ability to pursue Jacob’s clan. If that is the case, then Rachel must believe in the potency of the idols who watch over Laban. Presumably she thinks the teraphim might help Laban find the fugitives if the gods were to stay in his possession. Therefore, in Rachel’s mind the idols are not dead, and, as S. Teubal argues, “Rachel’s [...] carrying off of the teraphim [...] possesses a religious aspect” (52; cf. 98-9).

The second pericope deals with another escape by Jacob and his family, this time — from the neighboring Canaanites sometime after the departure from Laban’s house. In order to enlist Yahweh’s help in the clan’s flight, the patriarch orders a religious purge: “So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes’ ” (Gen 35:2). The reader might even be tempted to surmise, as does S. Teubal (52), that these “foreign gods” are the very teraphim stolen by Rachel from Laban (see below). However, whatever the idols may be, it appears that up to this point idol-worship has been tolerated in Jacob’s family, and if it were not for the pressing circumstances at hand, the patriarch might not have paid any attention to these pagan practices among his wives and children. And yet, given the monotheistic ethos of Genesis, this Hebrew paganism remains just a subtext not meant to detract from the Yahwism of early Israel.

Women’s Gods

The above can be used as a starting point for trying to understand something shared by two twentieth century novels that retell the events of Genesis. In Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and his Brothers* and in Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* the women of Jacob’s family are pictured as pagans. In fact, the way Mann and Diamant reimagine the above-mentioned theft of Laban’s teraphim illustrates this point. Here is what we read about Rachel’s motivation for stealing the idols in Mann’s novel: “In the secret depths of her heart she was

still an idol-worshiper and decided to err on the side of caution — just in case. She took Laban's advice-givers and soothsayers so that they would not tell him where the refugees went and would instead offer Jacob's clan their protection against pursuit" (268).¹

Diamant's Rachel thinks along similar lines: " 'We will take Nanshe with us,' [Rachel] said, naming Zilpah's beloved goddess of dreams and singers. 'We will take Gula, too,' naming the goddess of healing to whom Rachel made offerings. [...] I will take the teraphim and they will be a source of power for us' " (89-90). In Mann and Diamant a key aspect of idol-worship is placed in the foreground: the viability of the idols through a *physical* connection between the statues and human beings. As opposed to the power of the omnipresent Yahweh, the sphere of an idol's influence is limited by the idol's location in space. Thus, Laban's teraphim cannot help him if they are not close to him while they can help Jacob's clan thanks to Rachel's theft.

Both authors develop the logic implicit in the biblical text by spelling out Rachel's polytheistic beliefs and turning the brief allusion to her paganism in Genesis into something far greater than a mere subtext. However, comparing the way Rachel's attitude toward her action is presented by Mann and Diamant respectively, we find a striking difference. In *Joseph and his Brothers* Rachel's pagan spirituality is an embarrassing little secret presumably to be concealed from her more enlightened Yahwistic spouse: "In the secret depths of her heart she was still an idol-worshiper" (see above). The adverb "still" here indicates that Rachel's religion occupies a lower rung than Jacob's monotheistic beliefs in the spiritual evolution taking place on the pages of Mann's novel. This evolution away from polytheism goes back to the Joseph Tetralogy's Abraham who "in his unceasing search for God became more and more aware of the limitations of traditional gods" (C. Nolte: 69). No wonder Mann's Rachel is ashamed of putting her faith in Laban's teraphim. Given the magnitude of Abraham's legacy, Rachel appears to recognize the inadequacy of the idols, as compared to Yahweh, but she simply cannot help herself.

Diamant's Rachel, on the other hand, has no compunction about her paganism. Along with the women of Laban's household she seems barely aware of Jacob's religion and certainly has no spiritual inferiority complex. Furthermore, the teraphim are named —Gula and Nanshe — which puts them on the same level as Yahweh. By naming the idols,

¹ "Im geheimen Herzen war sie noch götzdienerisch und dachte zum mindesten: Sicher ist sicher. Für alle Fälle nahm sie dem Laban die Ratgeber und Wahrsager weg, damit sie ihm nicht Auskunft gäben über die Pfade der Flüchtigen, sondern diesen Schutz gewährten gegen Verfolgung" (here and elsewhere all translations from Mann are mine — V.T.).

Diamant's Rachel breathes life into the deities because a name increases the "ontological weight" of any individual. This is why in Genesis 31:19 the idols remain a nameless group, which emphasizes their inferiority to the named Hebrew deity. Finally, not only are the idols named in Diamant's novel, but the above-cited passage mentions exclusively *female* deities. The feminization of Laban's gods stems from a cornerstone of Diamant's novel, namely, the association of paganism with the female realm as a thoroughly positive phenomenon (see below).

These differences in attitude toward the teraphim pinpoint the two respective diametrically opposite ideological premises of *The Red Tent* and *Joseph and his Brothers*. Thomas Mann retains the patriarchal stance of Genesis by presenting Jacob's wives essentially the way the biblical text sees them: as secondary characters in intellectual and spiritual terms who appear largely unconcerned with theological issues. While Jacob in *Joseph and his Brothers* devotes his whole life to figuring out what God is about, his wives cannot lift their thoughts beyond making babies. The female-pagan connection stems quite naturally from this stance. According to J. H. Otwell, "a segment of the scholarly community has long held that women were virtually excluded from the worship of the God of Israel. It is alleged that their deities were the gods and goddesses of fertility" (152).²

However, whereas in Genesis the implicit association of the female realm with paganism is not important, Thomas Mann mobilizes this link for his own ideological purposes. Backward female spirituality in *Joseph and his Brothers* is a point of contrast to superior male religious development. As E. Murdaugh so aptly puts it,

obsolete barbaric behavior and the whole realm of the destructive irrational from which Joseph and the 'chosen people' of God must free themselves, are associated with the 'female element,' while the urge toward enlightenment and spirituality is considered to be 'male'. [...] One could interpret the entire work as the story of the

² Arguing with such proponents of this approach as G. Beer, J. H. Otwell contends that "women had had reserved to them their own unique and crucial kind intimacy with God: the bearing of children" (178). This argument does not deal adequately with the above-mentioned idea that Jacob's wives are not engaged with God intellectually. The bearing of children is a physical activity and its spiritual dimension is indirect at best (cf. I. Sheres: 29-30). Sheres argues in this connection: "Part of the reason for deemphasis of women's roles in the politics of Genesis is that the book is indeed patriarchal and therefore deliberately manipulated. [...] women belong in an a-political domain, and [...] the males in the Genesis narratives are heavily involved in transforming basic values" (7). This transformation of values comes in the form of theological activity and interaction with Yahweh.

struggle of the male light principle to liberate itself from the chthonic female principle (1978: 395).³

The female element in Mann's novel is truly pagan because it exists in the realm of the eternal return crucial to the world of polytheistic spirituality. To quote C. Nolte, "the central women figures in the novel [...] are eternal and unchanging. This is in sharp contrast to the father archetype, which is marked by constant change and development" (86). Thus, it is through the moral progression from Jacob's understanding of Yahweh as the one god to Joseph's superior grasp of the Hebrew deity's essence that history and linear time come into being, breaking away from the vicious circle of pagan mythic reenactment (cf. E. Murdaugh, 1976: 27-9).

Exemplifying this notion in Mann's novel is the evolution of sacrifice as a means of communicating with the divine. The pagan gods require literal human sacrifice as a means of maintaining world order, which is exemplified by the "cutting" of Potiphar's genitals by Huj and Tuj: "[Huij and Tuij] continued to cling to the old, and the sacrifice of their son is in the spirit of the old, the *matriarchal* order. By castrating him they actually made their sacrifice to the Great Mother" (C. Nolte 97; my italics — V.T.). In contrast to this stagnant female spirituality that characterizes the polytheistic realm in Mann's novel, Yahweh's evolving male moral stance rejects literal human sacrifice, requiring substitutional or metaphoric sacrifice, i.e., the ram instead of Isaac (cf. Gen 22). In fact the latter may be viewed as the central pillar supporting the ideology of the Joseph tetralogy.

Bad is Good

The above-cited values at the foundation of *Joseph and his Brothers* are turned upside down by Anita Diamant in *The Red Tent*. What Mann's novel sees as Yahweh's humaneness or civilizedness, Diamant's feminist perspective presents as barbaric, brutish

³ E. Murdaugh's argument goes on to prove that in *Joseph and his Brothers* there is one woman who transcends female darkness by acquiring spiritual monotheistic awareness. That woman is Tamar who "surpasses every other woman (i.e., Sarah, Rebecca and Rahel)" (405). However, Tamar is a minor character in both Genesis and Mann's novel — a digression of sorts. As R. J. Clifford and R. E. Murphy point out with respect to the biblical text, "there is no easy answer to why this story [Tamar and Judah] [...] is inserted here, interrupting the Joseph narrative" (38). The women who receive a significant amount of narrative attention in *Joseph and his Brothers* are Jacob's wives, i.e., Leah and Rachel are much more representative as examples of "female backwardness" within the ethos of Mann's tetralogy — all the more so because they are Jacob's feminine counterparts and stand in contrast with his higher consciousness.

bloodthirstiness that *does* require human sacrifice. Here is how Dinah, the heroine and narrator of *The Red Tent*, reports the perception of Yahwism by Jacob's concubine Zilpah:

[Zilpah] said that the presence of El hovered over [Jacob], which is why he was worthy of notice. Zilpah told me that El was the god of thunder, high places, and awful sacrifice. El could demand that a father cut off his son — cast him out into the desert, or slaughter him outright. This was a hard, strange god, alien and cold, but, she conceded, a consort powerful enough for the Queen of Heaven, whom she loved in every shape and name (Diamant: 13).

Yahweh (El) is “hard,” “strange,” “alien,” “cold,” — all epithets suggesting the opposite of life and joy. Clearly the god of Jacob has nothing to attract the female point of view in Diamant's novel. The reference to “awful sacrifice” ignores the notion of human-animal substitution, concentrating on what some biblical scholars view as an earlier strand underlying Genesis 22 (cf. R. E. Friedman 256-7 and S. Spiegel: 653-65, 77). According to this reading, Abraham initially does kill Isaac, which was later revised by the Bible's authors to reflect changes in the moral awareness of early Israel.⁴

Mann also admits that Yahweh's earliest manifestation is blood-thirsty and primitive — “a spiritually undistorted remnant from earlier, wilder times when God's essence was coming into being. Back then Yahu, the war and weather god possessed far more ominous and terrifying features” (235).⁵ However, the Joseph tetralogy seeks to show how far the Hebrew god ends up moving along the ethical spiral of masculine spirituality.⁶ Diamant, on the other hand, chooses to leave Jacob's god on the lowest rung of the moral ladder, stressing that the pagan gods of Jacob's wives are far more gentle and rational.

Thus, in Mann's novel Jacob tries but cannot imagine himself sacrificing his child: “That's when I broke down in the presence of the Lord, and my arm sank, and I dropped the knife, and I fell down to the ground, and my face hit the dust” (77).⁷ In *The Red Tent*, on the other hand, Jacob turns out to be fully capable of the deed, permitting the “sacrifice” of his

⁴ In the rabbinical literature of the Middle Ages this is known as the “bloody Akedah” according to which Abraham actually cuts Isaac's throat but Isaac is immediately revived by God (V. Tumanov: 287-88).

⁵ “[...] ein geistig unverzerrtes Überbleibsel aus früheren und wilderen Werdezuständen des Gotteswesens [...] in denen die Gesichtsbildung Jahu's, des Kriegs- und Wetterherrn [...] weit mehr arge und ungeheuerer Züge [...] aufgewiesen hatte.”

⁶ “The coiled spiral [...] gives further form to both repetition and change, making it commensurate with the stages of development that Mann regularly attributes to both divine and human self-consciousness” (W. E. McDonald: 128).

⁷ “Da versagte ich vor dem Herrn, und es fiel mir der Arm von der Schulter, und das Messer fiel, und ich stürzte zu Boden hin auf mein Angesicht.”

daughter Dinah. In Genesis 34 Dinah is raped by Shechem — the prince of the eponymous city. Consequently, Dinah's brothers massacre the whole population of Shechem in order to avenge their sister's lost honor. Jacob knows nothing of his sons' murderous designs before the massacre and therefore bears none of the blame for the genocide. In *The Red Tent*, however, Dinah is not raped by the prince but falls in love and plans to marry him (Diamant: 190, 193). So when the brothers sack the city and murder the prince, Dinah's life is destroyed. Diamant's Jacob knows about his sons' plans and yet gives them free rein, effectively *sacrificing* his daughter. Since the above-cited bloody El is Jacob's god, the deity ends up indicted by extension along with Jacob: "He blamed Simon and Levi and turned his back on them. But I saw full understanding in his clouded eyes as he stood before me. I saw his guilt before he had time to deny it" (Diamant: 206).

In the above-cited passage from *The Red Tent* where Zilpah talks of Jacob's cruel El, the Queen of Heaven is juxtaposed with the Hebrew god. That gentle female deity, so loved by Zilpah, is Ashera (cf. J. Blenkinsopp: 99), which is very significant in Diamant's attempt to turn the tables on the masculine ideology of the Old Testament. The cult of Ashera is a prime target of attack in the Deuteronomistic History. The latter — which includes the biblical books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings — is the work of one author or school (J. T. Walsh and C. T. Begg: 160). The cult of Ashera is considered by the Deuteronomistic History as a key component in the explanations of the great disaster that put an end to the last Jewish state — the destruction of the Southern Kingdom (Judah) by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E (cf. M. Smith: 81 and S. Teubal 91). The use of high places for worship is the other crucial abomination leading to Judah's demise (T. Walsh and C. T. Begg: 161). The kings of Judah are evaluated by the Deuteronomistic historian(s) on the basis of the rulers' behavior in this connection. King Manasseh is the worst culprit:

He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed [...]. He took the carved Asherah pole he had made and put it in the temple [...]. Therefore, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: [...] I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. I will forsake the remnants of my inheritance and hand them over to their enemies [the Babylonians — V.T.] (2 Kings 21:3-14).

The sacking of Jerusalem by king Nebuchadnezzar's armies is referred to from the postfactum perspective of those who completed the Deuteronomistic History already in Babylonian exile (J. T. Walsh and C. T. Begg: 160). The wrath of Yahweh — the cruel and merciless deity condemned by the feminine position of *The Red Tent* — cannot be assuaged

even by Manasseh's grandson, king Josiah, who casts the Asherah image out of the temple in 2 Kings 23:4 (cf. T. Walsh and C. T. Begg: 185).

All this explains why these very "abominations" appear as a key component of female paganism in *The Red Tent*. Combining the cult of Ashera and the use of high places, Diamant appears to challenge the implacable biblical point of view:

And he brought home a beautiful *ashera* — a tall pillar as big as Bilhah — made by the finest potter he could find. The women placed her up on the bamah, *the high place*, where sacrifices were offered. The goddess's face was especially lovely, with almond eyes and an open smile (Diamant: 20-21; my italics – V.T.).

Ashera is further celebrated in a passage where Zilpah decides to name her son Asher in honor of the goddess Ashera (Diamant: 60). Diamant is again making a feminist point as she deliberately ignores the real etymology of Asher's name — which has to do with the Hebrew root for "happy" (cf. R. J. Clifford and R. E. Murphy: 31) — and smuggles the forbidden goddess into the midst of Israel's tribes. The tribe of Asher is not only paganzed but also "feminized" through the connection with the female deity, which contributes to the anti-masculine religious message of *The Red Tent*.

Similar paganzation and feminization is carried out in Diamant's novel as Jacob himself demonstrates less than pure Yahwism: "On the seventh day after Reuben's birth, Jacob sat up, silently watching the sky, until sunrise. He poured libations and sang to the god of his fathers. He poured libations over the asherah, too, and opened his hands before her" (Diamant: 43). This is not Thomas Mann's Jacob who tries to explain to the pagan Jebsche that idols are lifeless objects in contrast to the living Yahweh (Mann: 54-5). Diamant's Jacob treats Yahweh and Ashera as comparable gods in this passage — both worthy of thanks for Reuben's birth. Since the fall of Jerusalem is in a way Ashera's fault (see above), Diamant creates a virtual provocation. The contact of Yahweh with the feminine deity shakes the very foundation of masculine divinity at the root of Yahwism, and this is accomplished of all people by the patriarch whose sons end up making the tribes of Israel! Perhaps nowhere else in *The Red Tent* does the author's revisionist approach serve her feminist objective more powerfully.

"Bad" Blood

Ashera is also associated in *The Red Tent* with the celebration of a biblical taboo: menstruation. When Rachel finally has her first (long awaited) period, the women in Jacob's

clan go through a ritual that has nothing to do with Judaism and everything to do with something as fraught with feminist symbolism as the Earth Mother cult:

They sang songs for the goddesses; for Innana and the Lady Asherah of the Sea. [...] [Rachel] drank as much sweet wine as she could hold. Adah rubbed Rachel's arms and legs, back and abdomen with aromatic oils until she was nearly asleep. By the time they carried her out into the field where she married the earth, Rachel was stupid with pleasure and wine (Diamant: 24).

A similar ritual — even more elaborate, but also involving the initiate's contact with the earth and pagan deities — is applied to Dinah when she has her first period. "Mother! Innana! Queen of the Night!" declares Rachel as she invokes the goddess to watch over Dinah, "accept the blood offering of your daughter, in her mother's name, in your name. In her blood may she live, in her blood may she give life" (Diamant: 172). The life-giving blood of menstruation, along with all of its pagan connections, is the opposite of the blood spilled by the violence of Jacob's sons at Shechem. In this case the comparison with Polytheism makes Yahwism look downright demonic in *The Red Tent*. In the Bible, however, the situation is exactly the opposite.

In the Book of Leviticus menstruation is viewed as a form of ritual uncleanness which turns a woman into an object of avoidance: "When a woman has her regular flow of blood [...] anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening. Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean, and anything she sits on will be unclean" (Lev 15:19-20). Yahweh threatens anyone who goes against this interdiction with death (Lev 15:30). From the standard biblical perspective, menstrual blood is "bad blood," but Diamant uses paganism and pagan ritual to make the blood good. A red tent, (the symbol-laden source of the novel's title) is used by Diamant's female characters to separate themselves from the masculine world during their periods (Diamant: 173). However, they do it not because they are unclean from the monotheistic point of view, but rather because the tent becomes a pagan temple of sorts where womanhood is given back its dignity.

Diamant chose to make the teraphim stolen by Rachel from Laban the patron deities of Dinah's first period. The preponderance of femaleness among the gods in the following passage further develops the polarization of masculine Yahwism vs. feminine paganism in *The Red Tent*:

Then Rachel brought out the teraphim, and everyone fell silent. The household gods had remained hidden until that moment. Although I had been a little girl when I'd seen them last I remembered them like old friends: the pregnant mother, the goddess

wearing snakes in her hair, the one that was both male and female, the stern little ram. Rachel laid them out carefully and chose the goddess wearing the shape of a grinning frog (Diamant: 172).

The link between these teraphim and menstruation goes back to Genesis 31:35. Sitting on top of Laban's gods, Rachel tells her father that she cannot get up to greet him because she is menstruating. What some interpreters of Genesis see as the desecration of the pagan gods by Rachel's menstrual blood (cf. R. J. Clifford and R. E. Murphy: 33 and the above-cited references to the menstrual taboo in Leviticus) turns out to be the very mechanism used by Diamant to associate the teraphim with the celebration of life — a young girl's initiation into womanhood. And in order to stress that Rachel in *The Red Tent* venerates, rather than desecrates the teraphim, Diamant connects the idols with the foreign gods present in Jacob's household in Genesis 35:2. Since Dinah's first period takes place long after the family leaves Laban's house, Diamant's Rachel has obviously cherished the idols for years after kidnapping the gods from her father and would never part from them of her own free will, i.e., presumably not until Jacob's command to destroy the gods after the Shechem massacre. There is no doubt in *The Red Tent* as to who ends up as the moral victor in the conflict between Jacob's El and his wives' teraphim. This is worlds away from Rachel's shame at her contact with the teraphim in Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers* (see above). Same gods — different writers.

Conclusion

A key component in Diamant's desire to right the wrongs of male domination in the Bible is the identity of the narrator in *The Red Tent*. In the spirit of making "the last first and the first last" Diamant takes Dinah — arguably the most insignificant character from Jacob's clan in Genesis — and makes the entire retelling of the Patriarchal History revolve around Jacob's only daughter. In the biblical text Dinah is far less intellectually or politically important than Jacob's wives. Dinah is not even granted the status of an ancestor figure, playing no role in the founding of the new nation's tribes (cf. I. Sheres: 15-16). With no speaking lines in Genesis and no chance to reveal any of her mind's contents by her actions, Dinah has only one function — to be the object of contention between the city of Shechem and Jacob's sons: "The redactive silence of Dinah is the most powerful weapon used in the text to undermine the woman's political attitude" (I. Sheres: 10). After Jacob's sons sack Shechem, Dinah vanishes from Genesis as if she never existed. In short, Dinah is the embodiment of female disempowerment in Genesis.

Therefore, the establishment of Dinah as the focal point of Diamant's novel can be viewed as a political feminist act related to the following observation by Robin Parry: "Women's experiences have been excluded (a) from the official interpretations of the Bible, and often (b) from the Bible itself making the Bible a powerful tool in the oppression of women" (2). Part of this "women's experience" is the feminine paganism inferable from Genesis which ends up marginalized by the masculine Yahwistic perspective of the biblical text but reimagined and magnified by Anita Diamant. This reconstruction process is what Robin Parry calls Feminist Revisionism: "The 'submerged female voices' of women hidden behind the text and tradition can be recovered from scraps of linguistic, rhetorical and narrative evidence" (5). However, this is not to say that *The Red Tent* seeks to undermine the entire biblical edifice. One look at Anita Diamant's other books should make it clear that the author is deeply engaged with Judaism: *Choosing the Jewish Life: A Handbook for People Converting to Judaism and for their Family and Friends* (1998), *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead and Mourn a Jew* (1999) and *The New Jewish Wedding* (2001). Instead, what Diamant accomplishes in *The Red Tent* stems from the desire to "relativise the androcentric texts [not] in every respect but simply in their androcentrism" (R. Parry: 26).

In his retelling of Genesis Thomas Mann chose not to relativise the androcentrism of the biblical text. This does not imply that Mann's main goal was to uphold the androcentric stance of the Old Testament. The purpose of *Joseph and his Brothers* was to reaffirm the humanistic values of Enlightenment in the face of Nazi barbarity sweeping across Germany and Europe in the 1930s and 1940s (cf. W. E. McDonald: 254, R. Cunningham: 16 and E. Murdaugh: 18). The mobilization of Germany's pagan roots and mythology by Nazi ideology caused Mann to pit the traditional mythic mind-set of ancient near-eastern paganism against the much more sophisticated morality and spirituality of nascent Judaism. However, to this end the author of the Joseph Tetralogy chose to associate pagan thinking with the female realm: a decision with extensive implications for a twentieth-century text. Although Mann "modernized" such exemplary male characters as Joseph and Jacob, bringing their values much closer to modernity than is the case in Genesis, the German author left the female characters largely unaffected by the transition from the Bible to the pages of a modern novel.

The importance and the virtually definitive nature of Mann's monumental novel is such that anyone attempting to retell Genesis must necessarily do this with the Joseph tetralogy as the background. Therefore, Anita Diamant's reading of Genesis in *The Red Tent* engages in debate not only with the biblical source text but with the ideology permeating

Joseph and his Brothers as well. Diamant's unwillingness to associate paganism with moral primitiveness ends up exposing the *continuity* of androcentrism that reaches from the earliest antiquity all the way to Mann's "progressive" modern humanist agenda. Although both authors share the common goal of speaking out against the dark forces that fuel unspeakable violence and barbarity, the difference in their respective approaches creates an unbridgeable ideological abyss between *The Red Tent* and *Joseph and his Brothers*.

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