Orthodox Jewish Law: Role of Women in Cynthia Ozick’s Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper will examine Cynthia Ozick’s representation of women in relation to Orthodox Jewish law. Jewish law treats women as intellectually and socially inferior to men. Ozick focuses on the double victimization of women, of being not only Jewish, but Jewish women, the child bearers who alone had the ability to carry on the Jewish “race”. Cynthia Ozick expresses her background with misogyny and Orthodox Jewish law in the stories’ narrative tone, their imagery, and their characterization of female protagonists. The female protagonists’ situations suggest that the legal precepts that limit women in Judaism hinder the development of an unbiased society that should value intellectual merit over gender. Ozick leads readers to question their own opinions about the capacity of men and women in both Jewish and American culture. Ozick suffered gender discrimination throughout her educational and professional life. Often Orthodox Jewish law was the basis for Ozick’s experiences with patriarchy. Through her short stories- “Levitation”, “Puttermesser and Xanthippe”, “Virility” and “The Shawl”, Ozick demonstrates that regardless of the reasons, Jewish law impedes intellectually ambitious women. This paper will demonstrate Ozick’s advocacy for gender equality in Judaism, in American society, and in fiction.

Keywords: Orthodox Jewish Law, Double Victimization, Misogyny, Gender Equality.
One of the most versatile contemporary American writers, Cynthia Ozick has written novels, short fiction, essays, poems, a play, and many articles and reviews. Ozick’s fiction, according to many critics, exemplifies “the Jewish writer oxymoron”, as referred in Metaphor & Memory (Ozick 178). Though Ozick is in favour of the Jewish Covenant and its tradition, but she uses her imagination to invent stories. Ozick, in fact, has always treated her tradition as a threshold rather than a terminus. She strongly refuses the label “woman writer”, but she writes essays in defence of feminism, demanding equal rights with respect to the Torah.

Born in New York City in 1928, Cynthia Ozick is the daughter of Russian Orthodox Jewish immigrants William and Celia Regelson. In an interview with Elaine M. Kauver, Ozick recounts her childhood rejection from Jewish seminary due to the rabbi’s insistence that she was only a girl and therefore did not have a reason to learn Jewish law or history (384). Ozick dates her feminism to that time and is especially grateful to her grandmother, who, refused to accept the rabbi’s decision, and insisted that Ozick receive a “standard [male] Jewish education” (Klingenstein252). Ozick reflects that when her grandmother came to pick her up at the end of the year, [...] the rabbi said to my bobe, Zi hot a golden kepele (“She has a golden little head”). That was the last time anybody ever told me I was intelligent for my whole school time until I got to high school (Kauver 385). Even as a child, Ozick changed her rabbi’s perceptions of what girls are capable of intellectually. Ozick owes her knowledge of Yiddish to a certain Rabbi Meskin, a teacher who taught girls as zealously as he taught boys, and to her grandmother.

During her time in public school, Ozick felt inferior not only because of her gender but also because of her Jewishness. While Ozick describes the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx as a lovely place, she found “brutally difficult to be a Jew”there (Lowin). She remembers having stones thrown at her and being called a Christ-Killer as she ran past the two churches in her neighbourhood. During elementary school at P.S.71, Ozick felt “friendless and forlorn. [She was] publicly ashamed in Assembly because [she was] caught not singing Christmas carols and repeatedly accused of deicide” (Klingenstein 252). Ozick said in 1989, I had teachers...who made me believe I was stupid and inferior” (Strandberg 6); and life “was very strange to have two lives like this : on the school side, where I was almost always the only Jew, and in cheder where I was almost always the only girl”( Kauver 385).
Both in graduate college and as a writer, Ozick suffered biased assumptions from her colleagues due to her gender. In *Art and Ardor*, Ozick discusses her prejudicial treatment by colleagues during her time as a university professor. She recounts that her male colleagues distrusted her opinions, since she was a “woman writer” and “woman teacher” (266). Acquiring a marketing job, Ozick received half the salary of men in the same position with the same education and experience (13). Ozick’s experience with gender inequality throughout her educational and professional life contributed to the imagery in her writing. Norma Rosen states in 1992, “not so long ago, any [female] writer worth her salt struggled to write herself free of the epithet ‘woman writer’ (146).

Orthodox Jewish law imposes an inferior status upon women outside the home. In the home, according to Jewish law, women have authority over all aspects of children’s upbringing and education, and the husband must abide by the wife’s decisions. At the same time, “from its very beginning, Judaism has been outspokenly patriarchal” (Trepp 268). Jewish law expects women, regardless of their intellectual achievements or contributions, to submit to their marital obligations.

The Orthodox do not expect women to study the Torah or Jewish law, women have been “kept ignorant of the processes of Jewish law” (Greenburg 10), and during synagogue services, women must sit separate from men, behind a “mehitzah”, or wall and screen, which divides the two genders (Trepp 271). According to Ozick, “my own synagogue is the only place in the world where I am not considered a Jew” (Friedman 360-61). Even though Ozick affirms that women should transcend their role as housewives, she admits that as an author she relied on her husband’s support. Despite Ozick’s initial dependency on her husband, however, she stresses that “a wife can support a husband quite as capably as the reverse” (Teicholz 187).

The Orthodox Jewish faith forbids mixed marriages, since marriage is, according to Schneider, an “agreement between Jewish men, Jewish women, and God, so it’s thought that the contract can’t possibly make sense if one partner isn’t Jewish” (321). Lucy and Jimmy Feingold’s mixed marriage in “Levitation” represents an assumption that converted Jewish women must submit to patriarchy both in their behaviour as wives and in their conversion to Judaism. Lucy is a Catholic who converted to Judaism in order to marry Jimmy. The separation of Lucy and Jimmy at the party, and Lucy’s purported inferiority as a writer within
the Jewish literary community generally, along with the inferiority she experiences in her marriage because of Orthodox Jewish law, represent Cynthia Ozick’s real life effort to overcome stereotypical assumptions about women’s place in Jewish-American fiction.

As Leonard Swidler puts it, “Jewish women were not only to be seen as little as possible; they were also to be heard and spoken to as little as possible” (123). During the party, Lucy speaks only to Feingold until the concluding paragraphs. When Jimmy grabs her arm, and declares that the party is a “waste [...] no one’s here” (Ozick, Levitation 10), he focuses his concern on the absence of his preferred, “elite” guests rather than on Lucy’s alienation. Ozick presents Lucy as a proper Jewish woman whose career is secondary to family, when Lucy realizes that she forfeited her intellectual independence by marrying Jimmy, she rebels against her marriage and faith and it confirms that Lucy’s gender is a catalyst for her separation from the male Jews.

Ozick’s “Puttermesser and Xanthippe” evaluates professional politics. Ruth Puttermesser is, according to the story, the first female golem creator. Her subconscious creation of the female golem Xanthippe represents her intellectual equality with male golem creators. Though Puttermesser possesses significantly more experience and education than the men replacing her, these men nonetheless usurp her position only because of their gender. Puttermesser’s relegation reflects Ozick’s encounters with misogyny in her professional life. Ozick’s short story “Virility” advocates against male success over female success by confronting more directly than the other stories the gender bias in literary reputation, and by incorporating Ozick’s reflection on the distress she herself felt when writing MPPL in which she tried to mimic Henry James’ style.

Although Ozick is not herself a Holocaust survivor, in her set of two stories collectively titled “The Shawl”, Ozick has contributed greatly to a better understanding of women’s double victimization, often revealing new insight into Holocaust experiences that have been so widely documented by men. The reader is directed to Rosa’s pre-Holocaust history and to the psychological burden of post-Holocaust survival, she is unable to face the horrible reality that her motherhood was stripped away. Rosa’s daughter Magda is the result of Rosa’s sexual assault by a Nazi. Magda is described as having “eyes blue as air”, (The Shawl 4). By including this information, Ozick reinforces the vulnerability of women in concentration camps: to sexual assault as well as to witnessing the death of the resultant
child. Still, Rosa’s victimization both as a Jew and as a mother, renders her unable to return to normal life.

In the case of Jewish victims, Joy Miller attributes to the fact that women faced a “double jeopardy” of being not only Jewish, but also Jewish women. According to Daniel Patterson, one unique aspect of the Holocaust was “the murder not only of human beings but of the very origin of human life and of human sanctity” – the murder of the Jewish mother and child (7-8).

Ozick does not portray her characters positively, and accordingly, the story doesn’t offer a solution concerning sexist critical reactions, or a positive character portrayal that exhibits how writers should behave. Ozick treats gender so ambiguously that she suggests that gender categories themselves are obsolete. To the American writer Edith Wharton, for example, Ozick attributes an “ongoing subliminal influence on current popular fiction,” [...]. Like Virginia Woolf’s, Ozick’s feminism is classical: that is, both writers reject “anatomy not only as destiny, but as any sort of governing force” (Ozick, Reader xxix).

Ozick ironically subscribes to the devaluation of women in her fiction to exemplify opposition to gender assumptions. Ozick characterizes her protagonists Lucy Feingold, Ruth Puttermesser, and Tante Rivka as inherently strong female intellectuals who through circumstances believe in their own inferiority. Lucy represents Ozick’s hero since she reaches an epiphany concerning her marriage and writing. Puttermesser, however, demonstrates anti-heroic characteristics since she is unable to recognize her inferior opinion of herself, continually relies on others, and therefore fails to grow as a person. In “Virility” Ozick uses Rivka as a narrative cipher to demonstrate male dominance in literature. Literary critics perceive a female poet, Tante Rivka, as unqualified to write powerful verse because of her gender. But under Gate’s pseudonym, they view the poem as hard and robust expressions of masculinity.

In Art & Ardor, she strongly criticizes the general tendency among male writers to equate the strivings of the artistic process with the “creativity of childbearing,” and she adds, “To call a child a poem may be pretty metaphor, but it is a slur on the labour of art. Literature cannot be equated with physiology, and woman through her reproductive system alone is no more a creative artist than was Joyce by virtue of his kidneys alone, or James by virtue of his teeth.
(which, by the way, were troublesome (271). With her essay “Literature and the Politics of Sex: A Dissent,” Ozick strongly rebukes the ideology of separation and segregation in vogue at the time, by committing herself to a literature that “does not separate writers by sex, from condition to condition...Literature universalizes...it does not divide” (285).

Yet, surprisingly, Ozick confirms her dual loyalty and controversial stance even with this issue. In her 1993 interview with Elaine Kauver, she asserts that Judaism and feminism cannot be considered “in ultimate conflict,” as scripture is the first source of feminism. When we read that human beings were made in the image of the creator, we also have “the primary text making feminist statements—that is, if feminism is to be defined as holding the sexes as equal in worth.” She concludes by saying that although she does not defend the “patriarchal hypotheses” that indeed she recognizes, she also claims that “the sociology of Jewish women, their living reality, has contradicted many of these patriarchal assumptions.” In more recent years, Ozick has narrowed the distance between her two credos i.e. belief in Judaism and belief in literature or the issue of women’s condition has become more important than the issue of being labelled “Jewish.”

She stresses in an interview with Catherine Rainwater that narrative tone must be allowed to rule absolutely, “without authorial interference, manipulation, or will” (260). Regardless of whether readers or critics recognize that the stories’ authors, narrators, or protagonists are men or women, their focus should remain on the quality of the text rather than on how gender influences the stories’ meanings. Therefore, Ozick continues to write stories and novels that assert her hope that genders will no longer influence readers’ judgements. Without doubt, Jewish women writers feel that their status still requires further debate and radical political change in order to attain acceptable recognition and Cynthia Ozick’s contribution has been crucial over the years to launching new challenging queries.
Conclusion

This paper shows that Cynthia Ozick’s art resists narrow categorization and her fiction overcomes rigid confines, both literary and ideological. Her female protagonists reflect her own self as she has gone through the same path. Though she is a great follower of Judaism, all the above stories show her penchant for the upliftment of women in this patriarchal world. She has a better understanding of women’s double victimization and powerful enough in her illumination of women’s experiences.
Works Cited


