

JEWISH SOCIALIST FEMINISM AND MOTHERHOOD IN TILLIE OLSEN'S "TELL ME A RIDDLE"

Rodrigo Andrés
Universitat de Barcelona

Reading a story by Jewish American writer Tillie Olsen often becomes an extremely intense experience. The humanity of her characters, the moral tone which permeates the text and the honesty and passion of the narrative voice have consolidated Olsen as a favorite among a wide readership. This admiration for Olsen's work is closely related to the personal qualities of the author, especially her tremendous humanity. Margaret Atwood best summed up this feeling for the Olsen/woman when she wrote: "respect" is too pale a word: "reverence" is more like it." (Pearlman & Werlock, ix).

Over the last twenty years, literary critics and political activists have produced a number of studies which focus on the figure of Olsen as a socialist feminist writer. Very few of them, however, have made reference to how the writer's Jewishness may have determined her political outlook on life.

In this paper we explore Olsen's novella "Tell Me a Riddle" (1962) in an attempt to show how three very specific Jewish cultural aspects have had an effect on Tillie Olsen's presentation of a key issue for a socialist feminist writer: the effects of motherhood on the working class woman. The cultural aspects that I will be discussing are three of the twelve that critic Bonnie Lyons includes in her epistemology "American-Jewish Fiction since 1945", which was published in 1988. I will be focusing on the centrality of the family in Jewish culture, the importance of "*Dos Kleine Menshele*" (Yiddish for "the common man"), and the balanced and moderate vision of Jewish culture walking the line between optimism and pessimism and between complete hopeful affirmation and despair.

About the first of these characteristics (i.e., centrality of the family), Bonnie Lyons herself states:

In post-World War II American-Jewish fiction, family is the crucial bond that links -or chains- people together. In this fiction the family is the locus of narrative and the agent of meaning. From the earliest American-Jewish literature until the most recent, the family is the heart of human life... Certainly family life is not always depicted positively in contemporary American-Jewish fiction, but it is always central. (Lyons 78)

The family as an omnipresent cultural institution is therefore a distinct point of reference for the protagonists of literary works produced by Jewish novelists and playwrights in the United States. This has been the case in works by Anzia Yeziarska, Michael Gold, Henry Roth, Arthur Miller, Philip Roth and Grace Paley, to cite some examples. The literary presentation of the Jewish family is very rarely Manichaeic in its nature. Rather on the contrary, it tends to show honestly the wide range of repercussions of the family in the development of the individual. On one hand this literary presentation portrays its most positive aspects, such as human warmth, moral

support and a feeling of belonging, while on the other hand, it denounces its most negative aspects. Among these are the limitations of the personal development of the individual, the castration of individual identity, and the external pressure from professional and sentimental life. Literary and social critic Irving Howe explains the double-edged nature of the Jewish family in his introduction to the collection *Jewish American Stories*:

An agency of discipline and coherence, the family has given the children of the immigrants enormous resources, but also a mess of psychic troubles. To have grown in an immigrant milieu is to be persuaded that the family is an institution unbreakable and inviolable, the one bulwark against the chaos of the world but also the one barrier to tasting its delights. (8)

Typical of Jewish fiction, Tillie Olsen's work in general, particularly her masterpiece novella "Tell Me a Riddle", highlights the importance of the family in the formation of the individual. However, Tillie Olsen goes one step further when she presents family dynamics across generations in the Jewish family. Whereas Yeziarska, Gold, H. Roth, P. Roth, and A. Miller had used their literary works to give full expression to the complexity of the effects that one parent has had over the psyche of his or her descendants, Olsen, a feminist mother herself, presents a new point of view in Jewish narrative by giving voice to one of the parents. In "Tell Me a Riddle" a sixty-nine year-old woman intimately ponders the issue of motherhood.

By choosing an old woman -Eva- as her protagonist, Olsen shows the influence of the second cultural aspect mentioned above: the Jewish concern for "Dos Kleine Menshele" (the common man). In this case, however, Olsen subverts the gender imperative of a male-oriented culture and dignifies the figure of "the common woman" giving a voice to the most stereotyped and at the same time ignored member of the Jewish family: the mother. Eva is an exhausted old woman from the working class in the process of progressive isolation from the world, since she is almost completely deaf and rapidly losing her eyesight. Her process of isolation is parallel to one of alienation from her relatives. Terminally ill with cancer, the physical symptoms of her illness turn her into the object rather than the subject of the narrative. Her reactions to the illness "defamiliarize" her and turn her into the focus of a virtual clinical observation by her husband and children, her body becoming the unknown and archetypal "Other". Eva's loss of agency and consequent objectification is emphasized by her progressive loss of language. Her voluntary silences at the beginning of the story finally become a litany of babbling in her final moments of agony. The female character is therefore limited to what Kristeva would label a pre-symbolic discourse, rendering her inarticulate in front of her potential audience.

But if Eva is forced to remain physically silent, with the exception of some fragmentary and delirious phrases pronounced in agony, Olsen allows the reader to get a glimpse of her point of view on various occasions. No matter how disconnected and interrupted, the text unfolds Eva's thoughts in short streams of consciousness. Thanks to this license, the reader learns about the otherwise suppressed voice of a working-

class mother. Olsen's intention is, in her own words, to give the "comprehensions possible out of motherhood" (the opportunity to) "come to powerful, undeniable, useful expression" (so as not to) "remain inchoate, fragmentary, unformulated (and alas, invalidated)" (Silences 202). In this and other passages, Olsen shows on the one hand her Jewish conception of art as a humanistic enterprise (Lyons 83) and on the other Tolstoian influences in her belief that literature should be the means to make this world a more humane place. By writing "Tell Me a Riddle", Olsen hopes she can help humanize the world through the insight offered from the point of view of a working class mother.

This innovative point of view represents a revolution within literature and becomes an invaluable source of knowledge for the feminist reader. In 1987, the feminist critic Marianne Hirsch posed that "the great unwritten story remains the story of the mother herself, told in her own voice" (261). According to Hirsch, the voice of the mother in literature is systematically silenced, but not only by patriarchy. In fact, there exists the possibility that the feminist writing and scholarship is obliterating this voice by adopting a daughterly perspective, "keeping mothering outside of representation and maternal discourse a theoretical impossibility" (261). Hirsch argues that "Maternal knowledge..., if it could be voiced, could enlarge a feminist analysis and reverse traditional conceptions of love and anger, of power and knowledge, of self in relation to other, of femininity and maturity, of sexuality and nurturance" (270). Of special value from a social point of view would be the study of the working mother, ultimate victim of the working class: "Mothers who must work to raise children to be acceptable members of their society can reveal a great deal about the functioning of ideology and the processes of assimilation and interpellation" (270).

Clearly Hirsch is unaware of Tillie Olsen's work. Since as early as the nineteen thirties, Tillie Olsen has been writing about the repercussions of motherhood for the working class woman. Her most important speeches and essays, collected in the volume *Silences*, published in 1972, reflect the third cultural aspect in Lyon's epistemology: The Jewish tendency to walk "the middle line between optimism and pessimism, complete hopeful affirmation and despair" (Lyons 74). Tillie Olsen consistently rejects giving either a romantic or a nihilistic perspective on motherhood. While in her essay "One out of twelve", Olsen can define motherhood as "an almost taboo area; the last refuge of sexism; what has been, is, the least understood, least and last explored, tormentingly complex *core* of women's oppression" (202), Olsen repudiates presenting motherhood exclusively in a negative light. In fact, in this very same essay Olsen defends motherhood as the only source of "invaluable comprehensions" about humankind, amongst which we can find "the very nature, needs, illimitable potentiality of the human being -and the everyday means by which these are distorted, discouraged, limited [and] extinguished" (Silences 202). In the following passage, Olsen underlines the complex nature of motherhood and the paradoxically oppressive liberation that it can actually represent for many women.

There is also -love. The need to love and be loved... The oppression of women is like no other form of oppression (class, color -though these have parallels). It is an

oppression entangled through with human love, human need, genuine (core) human satisfactions, identifications, fulfillments. (258)

Because Olsen is aware of the complex effects of motherhood, she will avoid exploring this issue through a Manichaeian approach, always wondering “how to separate out the chains from the bonds, the harms from the value, the truth from the lies” (258).

Olsen’s analysis of both “the harms” and “the values” inherent to motherhood makes her different from most socialist feminist theoreticians in the United States and Europe. Some of these critics conceptualize the role assigned to mothers in the Western heterosexual family as the epitome of women’s oppression. Kate Millett, Michèle Barrett and Angela Davis, among others, categorically denounce the family as the main institution of patriarchy benefiting capitalism and keeping women in a slave-like status. In the other extreme of the socialist feminist amalgam we find other critics who read motherhood in a much more positive light. Young writers such as Patricia Hill Collins and veteran feminists such as Betty Friedan, Jean Beathke Elshstain and Germaine Greer, have recently reevaluated the family as the main source of value, self-esteem and identity for women, and motherhood as an act of resistance to the oppression exerted by mainstream Western culture.

Tillie Olsen’s balanced and moderate vision of motherhood is not only evident in her essays and speeches, collected in the volume *Silences*. This philosophy is also clearly at work in her literary production, which walks the middle road between the celebration of the values that arise with motherhood and the denunciation of the limitations that motherhood imposes on women. In “Tell Me a Riddle”, Eva is torn between the “harms and values” of having mothered seven children.

The harms are those injuries suffered throughout a war that has lasted for almost a whole lifetime and in which the mother can only be defeated: “her family, the life in it, that had seemed the enemy: tracking, smudging, littering, dirtying, engaging her in endless defeating battle —and on whom her endless defeat had been spewed” (81). Eva, always “*forced to move to the rhythms of others*” (81)¹, has sacrificed her own life for those of her children: “denying; removing, isolating” (82). In fact, her loneliness amidst the warmth of so many other human beings in her house is not paradoxical. To her daughter Vivi’s statement: “you lived all your life *for* people” Eva quietly responds “Not with” (89). The mother’s isolation is only worsened by the frustration of not having fulfilled all the duties she had demanded from herself regarding her children’s education: “Heritage! But when did I have time to teach? Of Hannah I asked only hands to help” (94). “What I intended and did not?” (101).

The pain and the frustration from the past make it impossible for Eva to reassume, even momentarily, the slightest responsibility over a newly born grandson:

And they put a baby in her lap. Immediacy to embrace, and the breath of that past: warm flesh like this that had claims and nuzzled away all else and with lovely mouths

¹ Italics not ours.

devoured; hot-living like an animal -intensely and now; the turning maze; the long drunkenness; the drowning into needing and being needed. Severely she looked back -and the shudder seized her again, and the sweat. Not that way. Not there, not now, could she, not yet...

And all that visit she could not touch the baby. (97)

But even if the terms “maze”, “drunkenness” and “drowning” denote loss of direction, consciousness and identity, not everything in motherhood has been renunciation and alienation. Being a mother has been Eva’s passion and has given meaning to a great part of her life. This is so much so that now that the children have all left the family house, Eva feels the need to re-canalize the enormous energy that the caring, both physically and emotionally, for people has extracted from her.

It was not that she had not loved her babies, her children. The love -the passion of tending- had risen with the need like a torrent; and like a torrent drowned and immolated all else. But when the need was done -oh the power that was lost in the painful damming back and drying up of what still surged, but had nowhere to go. Only the thin pulsing left that could not quiet, suffering over lives one felt, but could no longer hold nor help. (96)

Tillie Olsen’s dignification of the figure of the dying mother -an apparently anti-heroic character- and her presentation of the emotional interdependence between the members of a close family make “Tell Me a Riddle” a distinctly Jewish story within North American literature. Eva’s -and Olsen’s- conclusion that motherhood is neither the epitome of woman’s oppression nor her only source of power inscribe the author within the classical Jewish philosophical position, equally distant from the romantic and the nihilistic radical extremes. Tillie Olsen’s Jewishness has influenced her anti-Manichaeic view on motherhood and her balanced voice within the debate among different socialist feminists in Europe and America.

WORKS CITED

- Barrett, Michèle. *Women's Oppression Today*. London: Verso, 1980.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Vintage, 1981.
- Hirsch, Marianne. “Maternal Narratives: ‘Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood’” *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 261-273.
- Howe, Irving. Introduction. *Jewish American Stories*. Ed. Irving Howe. New York: Mentor, 1977. 1-17.
- Kristeva, Julia. “The Semiotic and the Symbolic.” *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. New York, NY.: Columbia University Press, 1986 89-136.
- Lyons, Bonnie. “American-Jewish Fiction Since 1945.” *Handbook of American-Jewish*

- Literature: An Analytical Guide to Topics, Themes and Sources*, Ed. Lewis Fried. Westport: Greenwood, 1988. 61-89.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago, 1972.
- Olsen, Tillie. *Silences*. New York: Delta, 1989.
- . "Tell Me a Riddle." *Tell Me a Riddle & Yonnonidio*. London: Virago, 1993. 76-129.
- Pearlman, Mickey and Abby H.P. Werlock. *Tillie Olsen*. Boston: Twayne, 1991.
- Stacey, Judith. "Are Feminists Afraid to Leave Home? The Challenge of Conservative Pro-family Feminism." *What is Feminism?* Ed. Juliet Mitchell & Ann Oakley. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986. 219-248.