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NEW VOICES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

Marriage and Sexuality in Pearl Abraham's *The Romance Reader* and *Hush* by Judy Brown

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This article examines two authors' perspectives on marriage and sexuality in Hasidic Judaism through the leading female characters in their semi-autobiographical novels: *The Romance Reader* by Pearl Abraham and *Hush* by Judy Brown. Each novel features an adolescent woman on her path to marriage and their experience of matrimony and sexuality within their respective Hasidic communities. The aim of the article is to analyse and compare their views in order to gain a better understanding of the female experience of sexuality and marriage within contemporary Hasidic Judaism. Furthermore, this article discusses the treatment of sexual abuse within a particular Hasidic group. It employs a methodology of close reading combined with a discussion of Talmudic, theological, sociological and ethnographic commentaries on the subject.

Article

Over the last few decades, Hasidic Judaism has moved from its peripheral position in Jewish studies to a more central location. Increasingly, Hasidim are seen as the last guardians of the holy spark of Torah; defenders of true *Yidishkeit* in an ever modernising world. The renewed appreciation for Hasidim within Judaism means that they have gained traction in the academic world, including literary studies. Although Hasidic fiction still occupies a niche space within American literature, texts that discuss the religious practice of Judaism have become more mainstream. We are no longer surprised when an author describes a world quite different from the cultural Judaism of Malamud, Roth and Bellow. Novels written about and by Hasidim, as well as memoirs and short story collections, have become a familiar sight in the landscape of Jewish American literature. Moreover, while readers may have become familiar with depictions of male Hasidim and the ways in which they see the world, for instance, through the works of Chaim Potok,¹ we now also have access to texts written by female Hasidim.

Today, a female Hasid is generally better educated in secular subjects than her male counterpart, who is expected to focus solely on his Talmudic study. Consequently, we now have a larger number of female authors, who were taught English literature at school writing about Hasidic Judaism. This is of special significance since the male and female experience of Hasidism is vastly different due to the highly patriarchal nature of ultra-Orthodox Judaism, which insists on distinct gender roles as delineated in Jewish theology. The works produced by female authors such as Pearl Abraham and Judy Brown paint a very different world from Potok's 1950s Lubavitcher Hasidim, in which Danny and his Orthodox friend, Reuven, enjoy highbrow theological conversations, while any female characters are only mentioned in their role as mother, wife or sister. In contrast, Abraham's *The Romance Reader* (1995) and Brown's *Hush* (2010) depict female expectations of marriage and the ways in which the female Hasidic body is used as a site of struggle for control over sexuality

¹ Potok was raised as an Orthodox Jew, not a Hasid, but he grew up near a large Hasidic community, which kindled his fascination (see Field [1985: 4]).

and female identity. In this article I shall analyse Brown's and Abraham's illustrations of female Hasidic sexuality and their thoughts on matrimony.

Let us first consider what the life of a Hasidic woman might look like, which also depends on which sect she is from, as sects can range from the most extreme ultra-Orthodox (Satmar) to relatively liberal (Lubavitch). Yet, in all of these sects a woman's life is defined by her relations to others. Susan Jacobowitz writes that 'some have suggested that there are no Hasidic women, only mothers, wives and daughters of Hasids' (Jacobowitz, 2004: 78); a bleak view, but not an ungrounded one. First of all, a Hasidic girl is born to be a good daughter. One of her main duties is protecting her modesty, '*tsnius*', to preserve herself for her future husband, as is helping her mother with household chores and raising her brothers and sisters. As soon as she marries, she must be a good, obedient wife and a selfless mother, a vessel for future Jewish generations (Jacobowitz, 2004: 77), willing to have as many children as God gives her. Thus, a Hasidic woman mainly exists in her relationships to other people as a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, an aunt or a grandmother. Her life is predominantly dedicated to other people; because, if isolated from her relations (or obligations) to her family she has no apparent value; she does not really exist.

Apart from running the household, a Hasidic woman is also supposed to negotiate with the secular world. She forms a buffer between the Hasidic world of men filled with Torah study and the evil *goyische* world filled with temptations from the *sitra achra*.² While Hasidic women are required to fulfil any necessary participation in the *goyische* world (by having jobs to provide an income, doing groceries, learning English etc.), Hasidic men are protected from it. Sociologist Ayala Fader reiterates this point; female engagement with the secular world 'enables them to create a sheltered cave for boys and men who study Torah' (Fader, 2009: 2). Yet paradoxically, the streets in the neighbourhoods occupied by the Hasidim 'belong to men' (Fader, 2009: 150), and women have to be invisible in order not to provoke lustful thoughts in Hasidic males. That could mean crossing the street in order to prevent walking on the same pavement or avoiding leaving home all together when men are

² The 'other side'; the realm of evil.

on their way to pray in the synagogue. This illustrates the point raised above: nearly everything a Hasidic woman is supposed to do is in service of Hasidic men and their children; it is never for her own sake.

Judith Plaskow has argued that the situation of Jewish woman is unequal to men because women are not perceived as normative Jews (Plaskow, 1990: 6). Most of the laws that pertain to women only attempt to control a woman's sexuality, handle her 'abnormal' biology or explain who 'owns' her virginity (her father, her betrothed or her husband) (Plaskow, 1990: 4). The body of a Jewish woman is her most important asset, as it is in her womb that new Jewish babies grow, but it also forms a threat to the Jewish community when she is not a good, faithful wife or obedient daughter protecting her *tsnius*: for one this could result in babies that do not have Jewish fathers. This is why most Talmudic laws pertaining to women are actually about her body, her biological cycle, her sexuality, her virginity etc. Most Jews no longer follow the letter of the Talmudic law, but Hasidim do. This begs the question of how Hasidic women view their own bodies and sexuality and their role in the Jewish community. Brown and Abraham both attempt to answer these questions in their respective novels.

Pearl Abraham's *The Romance Reader* (1995) is a sympathetic coming-of-age story of a girl who never quite fits within her community. Part of the strength of the novel is Pearl Abraham's capability to explain the alien world of the Hasidim to her secular readers, a world she herself is all too familiar with. Abraham was born in a Satmar Hasidic community in Israel and lived alternately in Monsey, New York and Jerusalem from the age of five. Her father was a rabbi and like her character Rachel, she was fond of secular literature (forbidden or at least frowned upon in the Hasidic world). She was lucky to attend an Orthodox yeshiva school because the education she received was much better and more liberal (it allowed her to study English literature) than a Satmar education would have been. After secondary school, she began attending Rockland Community College in secret. She found a boyfriend, who was part Jewish, and decided to follow him to the State University at Stony Brook, after which she attended Hunter College and subsequently NYU where she obtained

a Master of Fine Arts. Although she broke away from Hasidism during her college years, she insists she has not rejected it (Smith/Abraham, 2005: n. pag.). Her unique position as a former insider who has developed a critical distance from the community allowed her to write a detailed account of growing up as a Satmar teenager. It is important to note that Satmar is one of the strictest, most right-wing Hasidic sects;³ hence, Rachel's story is quite specifically Satmar apart from also being Hasidic.

Rachel Benjamin grows up in a suburban non-Jewish community, which is a popular holiday destination for Hasidim during the summer months but is abandoned for the rest of the year.⁴ Isolated from the Satmar community to which she belongs and envious of the endless amount of freedom non-Jews appear to enjoy, she comes to question whether or not she wants the life of a Hasidic wife. The fact that her mother suffers from bouts of depression and even threatens to commit suicide does not quite provide her with a role model for Hasidic wifely bliss. Rachel is not exposed much to the outside world, apart from the romance novels (hence the title), which she sneaks into the house and hides beneath the mattress. She is well aware of the limitations of being a Hasidic girl, yet the ideas about what she would like her life to resemble are still very much confined to her narrow perception of what it means to be a woman; to Rachel it predominantly means being thin and beautiful. For instance, Rachel questions whether she wants a family, but only because she believes that her body will look thinner (and hence 'better') if she does not have children: 'I don't know if I want a family. I'd rather go to the store and buy sandwiches. . . I don't want to cook. I don't know if I want babies. That's how you look good after you're married' (Abraham, 1995: 16). She does not seem to consider other reasons for why a woman might choose not to have children.

It appears that her perception of a woman's value is quite secular, influenced by our society's preoccupation with female beauty, but in the Hasidic world a woman's

³ Meaning conservative, even within ultra-conservative Orthodox Judaism.

⁴ The novel is set in 'Monhegan', but it is unclear whether this is the island Monhegan or a fictional place since no mention is made of the fact that they live on an island; even though the family takes trains and buses, they never seem to go on a ferry when they visit New York or other places, Brooklyn for instance is only a bus ride away.

outer beauty is just as important, if not more so than in the secular world. It even goes back to the Talmudic period: a man is not allowed to marry a woman without having seen her first, lest he finds her unattractive and comes to resent her afterwards (Kiddushin 41a: 2).⁵ The Talmud thus validates the importance of the outer beauty of Jewish women, while a woman may marry a man without seeing him as the lack of male attractiveness could never make her resent her husband. Women are also objectified and compared to jewels that need to be wrapped up and kept hidden. This idea is based on psalm 45 line 14: 'Kol kvoda bas melech pnima': all of the respect of a Jewish woman is on the inside. One would think that this psalm makes reference to a woman's inner beauty, but somehow this is taken to mean outer beauty, which needs to be kept under wraps at all times.

The comparison to an object is even more appropriate since a woman's agency is severely restricted. Much like the Victorians, Hasidim appear to like their unmarried women to resemble a statue of the Virgin Mary; beautiful, thin, gracious, untouched, devoid of carnal desire, wrapped up from head to toe and placed on a very high pedestal. Apart from being modest, she has to be thin (an American size 6/UK size 10 verges on unacceptable), dressed up in expensive clothes, wearing heels, a full face of natural looking make-up, which will make men believe that she is naturally beautiful and, where necessary, complemented by plastic surgery – all to make a woman more marketable. Yet, her beauty must remain hidden and she should never attract male attention through her looks, except that she should, because otherwise she will not find a *chassan*, a husband. Especially when a woman has reached the age of 18 and her family is actively looking for a *shidduch* she needs to be seen in the most expensive, elegant clothes her family can afford, dressed up like a doll, smiling gracefully, in order for someone to notice her and say, 'I know a nice young man for you'. *Tznius* is fetishised, which means that Hasidic women are sexualised in the same way as their non-Hasidic sisters. When women are not seen as individuals, as persons, but

⁵ 'A man may not betroth a woman before he sees her, lest he [subsequently] see something repulsive in her, and she become loathsome to him'. See *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, Kiddushin 41a, 134. <https://halakhah.com/pdf/nashim/Kiddushin.pdf>.

as objects, their outer beauty quickly becomes their most prominent feature. Rachel understands the catch-22 Hasidic women find themselves in: they have to be thin and yet after they are married they ought to have as many children as God intends to give them, even though maintaining a slim figure whilst always being pregnant or just recovering from pregnancy is virtually impossible. Rachel concludes that the solution is to be married, but not get pregnant.

Rachel's parents are just as concerned with her body as she is and especially with her 'immodest' clothing that makes her appear 'loose'. To put this in perspective, one of the major fights Rachel has with her parents is about what kind of stockings she should wear. Rachel's stockings are not the prescribed thick, opaque coloured ones donned by most Hasidic girls, but opaque beige or taupe (black would be too sexual, crossing several lines). They also do not have a seam running down the back to clearly indicate that these are stockings and not her bare legs (even though the thick opaque beige makes this abundantly clear). The type with the seam is worn by the most Orthodox of Hasidic women. In the novel, Rachel is actually called a whore for wearing seamless stockings. The matter is so important that Rachel's father goes all the way to Williamsburg and visits the principal of the Satmar girls' school to discuss the issue of his daughter's stockings with him. Then, based on the recommendations of the principal, he buys the appropriate stockings. From the outside this seems peculiar and even Rachel thinks the whole issue and how her father handled matters is ridiculous: 'He went to Williamsburg to talk to a man about girls' stockings. Two men talking about what I should put on my legs' (Abraham, 1995: 138). To ultra-Orthodox men, a woman's body is a problem; it needs to be contained, controlled, regulated and covered-up. Women (lacking the necessary intellectual capacity to study Talmud and understand *halakha*)⁶ cannot be trusted to do this themselves. Paradoxically, that which poses the biggest problem, the body of the Jewish woman, is also the most essential.

As time passes, Rachel sees her future becoming even narrower. At 17, she seems to have no choice but to marry the first man suggested to her by the *shadchan*

⁶ The collective noun for laws comprised of the Written and the Oral Torah (the *Mishna*).

(matchmaker). Hasidim are not allowed to choose their own partners, they are chosen for them by their parents with the help of a matchmaker, a *shadchan*. Once a potential match, *shidduch*, has been found, the child has the opportunity to reject the proposed spouse after their first meeting, but you are only allowed a few rejections before you either have to accept or become unmarriageable. You do not know who the next candidate will be: he or she might be worse than your first proposed match. Rachel's parents are anxious to marry off their impossibly unchaste, rebellious daughter before she can do more damage to her (and consequently her family's) reputation. Besides, her brother David, the crown jewel of the family, cannot marry before his older sister and therefore Rachel's father wants to hurry Rachel into a marriage as soon as possible so he can direct his attention to his more worthy second child.⁷ Rachel knows this all too well: 'I'm only a daughter, and not one who will bring honour to this family. He wants to get to David. For David he can choose from the best' (Abraham, 1995: 200). A match for 16-year-old David, who is a good *yeshiva* student, is quickly found, but he is not even informed of his engagement, lest it distracts him from his studies. In Hasidic Judaism, a man is not allowed to choose his partner either, although at least he will not have to obey his chosen wife once they are married.

Rachel's father's anxiety continues to grow and he appears ready to accept any man for his little 'harlot':

"We'll have to be satisfied with whatever comes. The first that comes. . . The Talmud says a father has a responsibility: he must give his daughter to a scholar and to a good family. It doesn't say anything about a daughter who's given herself a reputation, a daughter who's made things impossible for her father, a daughter who's better known to strangers than to her own father."
[Rachel comments] he speaks of me the way the prophets speak of whores. As if I've walked the streets, invited men into my bed. (Abraham, 1995: 204–6)

⁷ Children are married off according to their age, from the oldest to the youngest child. If you pass the oldest child (or any of the other children in their particular order) they will be considered much less desirable, it will seem like the reason they were not married before their sibling is because there is something wrong with them.

This passage stresses the limitations of a woman's agency; a father *gives* his daughter to another man; wedding your daughter is like managing the sale of your property, you have a great deal of control over it. According to the Talmud (Yevamoth 107a), a father is entitled to marry off his daughter when she is a minor without her consent⁸ or even sell her into slavery.⁹ To the Hasid, it is a father's duty to make sure his daughter fulfils her primary purpose as a Jewish woman and marries a Jewish man. Yet, the way Rachel's father speaks about her makes her feel even worse than just his property. Even though Rachel is still a virgin and has not even touched a man; her father describes her as damaged property, beyond repair.

The idea that women are the property of men is further emphasised by the fact that in the Talmud (*Seder Nashim*; Ketubot 39a–40b) rape is predominantly considered a crime of theft and a crime against a woman's reputation, which could be erased by paying a fine¹⁰ to the woman's father.¹¹ His property, his daughter's hymen, has been stolen, her reputation has been compromised and hence he deserves a payment for his financial loss: his daughter's value has declined due to the fact that her hymen is broken. The value of the statutory fine is fixed (50 shekels); however, the compensation for 'indignity' (causing shame) and 'blemish' (injury to the woman's reputation) depends on the woman's 'market value',¹² nicely commodifying a woman's virginity.¹³ Moreover, the rapist has to marry his victim, according to the age old notion that if you break it, you buy it.¹⁴ The *Mishna* in Ketubot 39a says: 'The [rapist]

⁸ *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, Yevamoth 107a, 2. <http://www.halakhah.com/rst/nashim/24f%20-%20Yevomos%20-%20107a-122b.pdf>.

⁹ *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Sotah 23a, 76. <http://www.halakhah.com/rst/nashim/28%20-%20Sotah%20-%202a-49b.pdf>.

¹⁰ Actually he has to pay four types of fines: the statutory fine, compensation for causing the girl to feel shame, compensation for 'blemish' (damage to the girl's reputation) and a fine for the pain caused by the rapist.

¹¹ *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, Ketubot 39a-40b, 38-44. <http://www.halakhah.com/rst/nashim/25b%20-%20Kesuvos%20-%2029a-54a.pdf>.

¹² Ketubot 40a-40b, 41–43.

¹³ She should be considered as a 'bondswoman', a slave, sold in the market place. Ketubot 40a, 42.

¹⁴ In this case the fine should be paid to the victim, if she is considered to be of age (after the age of twelve years and six months). If she is underage the fine will go to her father.

must drink out of his pot'.¹⁵ At least the *Gemara*¹⁶ allows the victim to refuse marrying her rapist,¹⁷ although this might condemn her to eternal singlehood.

Rachel conversely sees her reputation as something that could benefit her. "There's a lot to be said for reputations. My reputation will help the *shadchan* find someone for me, not Father. How else would he know whom to bring?" (Abraham, 1995: 206). She is more concerned with finding a relatively 'liberal' husband than what people may think of her. There is also a definite double standard, because men will be forgiven if they go through a rebellious phase and it does not need to affect their marriage prospects. A Hasidic girl interviewed by Stephanie Wellen Levine comments: 'Boys, you come back, you learn six months in 770 [the Lubavitch Chabad central headquarters], and everything's great. He's great. He experimented a bit perhaps, but then everything dies down and people respect him again. Whereas the girls, her quote unquote reputation will follow her' (qtd in Wellen Levine, 2004: 93). Men will be more likely to forgive other men, or look the other way; they can bend the rules a little for their own gender as long as the boy in question repents. Furthermore, women are supposedly on a 'higher spiritual plane', hence they are held to a higher standard, therefore 'boys will be boys', but girls cannot make mistakes. As men make ('interpret') all the laws, they can choose whatever is most convenient for them.

As her parents discuss marriage options with the *shadchan*, Rachel is torn between two different emotions; on the one hand, she associates marriage with increased independence: 'I'm beginning to want things of my own. I want to live on my own. Married is the only way I can be on my own. I have to become Mrs. Someone' (Abraham, 1995: 209). She realises the paradox: in order to have things of her own, live by herself, she needs to become someone's wife. Her dependence on her husband is emphasised by the fact that she says 'Mrs. Someone', she will give up her own last name, representative of her (single) identity and become her husband's appendage. On the other hand, she sees her own bleak future when

¹⁵ Ketubot 39a, 38.

¹⁶ The rabbinical commentary on the *Mishna*.

¹⁷ Ketubot 39b-Ketubot 40a, 40–41.

watching her best friend Elke unpack gifts for her new home: 'I look at her, a bride dressed in pale-peach chiffon, carrying a shiny beige vacuum cleaner' (Abraham, 1995: 208); a depressing image evocative of the classic Stepford wife. Elke, who used to be a bit of a rebel herself, seemingly has her personality sucked out of her and is transformed into a docile bride-to-be, all sparkly eyes believing herself to be in love with her *chassan*, whom she has only met once. The fact that Elke and Rachel used to experiment sexually with each other is swept under the rug. Then again, the idea of being gay might not even have occurred to either of them when they have been brought up to believe that their sole purpose in life is to marry a Jewish man and give him Jewish babies. They knew that what they were doing was 'wrong', but tacitly agreed it was only until they were married and could experience the 'real thing'. Elke has decided that her best chance of happiness is getting with the program, convincing herself that she is in love and marital bliss will await.

Rachel's mother Tova believes that once Rachel is married she will do whatever her husband asks her because she is so in love with him. In Tova's mind, women fall in love after the first wedding night: 'a smart boy asks right after the first night; it's the best time to get a girl to agree' (Abraham, 1995: 219). This statement appears at odds with Hasidic sexual practice, which neglects and ignores female pleasure. Considering the fact that in Hasidic Judaism foreplay is considered sinful frivolity and the sexual act is reduced to a husband simply lying on top of his wife while she is still wearing her nightgown and penetrating her (using lube as recommended by his rabbi), it is hard to imagine that sex is going to make a woman feel all happy and in love. Rachel is rather sceptical about Tova's ideas as well, 'as if sex with a man is supposed to make you softer, better, more religious. Ma thinks that after I'm married I'll start wearing seams if Israel asks me' (Abraham, 1995: 219). Again, one of Rachel's biggest flaws, her refusal to wear seamed stockings, returns in the discourse.

Rachel's anxiety grows as the day of her wedding approaches. She fantasises about getting a divorce, she worries about getting pregnant year after year. Her mother was only allowed to use the rhythm method after she had seven children and her rabbi was particularly lenient. Even her divorce fantasies are not all that

comforting. She wishes she could move away and live on her own without having to get married and divorced first: 'Not this way. . . not married and possibly pregnant. Why not before? Whole. Unused. Not having slept with a man. After, I will be older, taken' (Abraham, 1995: 235). To some extent Rachel has been indoctrinated by the misogynistic sexual discourse around her, she associates virginity with being 'whole' and 'unused'. Yet perhaps this signifies how she wants to keep all of her body, all of her to herself, to not be forced to give any part to a man in order to eventually break free. She finds it difficult to feel excited about the wedding day itself as she knows that no matter how beautiful the day, married life will be grim: 'A wedding should be ugly, to suit what comes after. A beautiful wedding is a lie. It shouldn't be beautiful like in a book. Novels are lies, lies upon lies' (Abraham, 1995: 236). Rachel sees the wedding day as a false promise of what is to come, the way books are a false promise of what life could be, a promise Rachel used to believe in, but now feels terribly disillusioned with.

On the day of her wedding Rachel's anxiety has reached a climax, she is terrified about the fact that her wedding is actually taking place and that she might become pregnant soon:

I don't want to become pregnant. My mind wanders. I should leave all this. When the wedding's over, I should go away. I should get up now and announce that it's over, that it was all a big mistake. . . I didn't think I'd ever be sitting in this chair. I was sure something would stop this wedding. That it wouldn't happen to me, that I'd be saved. I thought the Mittelmans would find out about me and break off the engagement; I thought of ways to make them break it off. Mornings, I prayed for a miracle. (Abraham, 1995: 244)

Rachel gives the impression of a lamb being led to the slaughter, unable to prevent or change the sequence of events urging her forward into married life. Amidst all of this, Rachel perceives her environment with ever more critical eyes, 'a woman isn't allowed to hand things to another man directly. To avoid temptation. To avoid spilling seed. Men must be so easily tempted' (Abraham, 1995: 244–5). She sees how

religious observance has been pushed to the extreme, to the point of absurdity, in order to make sure all the minute details of the law are obeyed. The ceremony, which had seemed so beautiful to her before, is now subject to her new feminist scrutiny and she discerns how it only serves to affirm male dominance:

The cantor sings, and I circle Israel seven times. This has always been my favourite part of the ceremony. The slow, sad song, the groom looking serious and scared, swaying hard in prayer, the bride turning round and round her husband the way she's expected to live the rest of her life, around her husband, like the moon around the earth. (Abraham, 1995: 246)

This observation is rather astute, but Rachel can only observe, as she has no power. Women can make observations about the law and their condition, but they have no power to change anything, unless they leave Hasidism. Her new husband pronounces, "with this ring you are holied and bound to me by the Law of Moses and Israel". I don't want to be bound to him by any law. But I remain silent; nothing is expected of me at this ceremony' (Abraham, 1995: 247). No explicit consent from the bride is required, hence at the *moment supreme* she is unable to refuse her marriage. Her body now belongs to her husband.

The wedding night is a surreal experience, which is unsurprising considering Rachel has never even been touched by a man and is suddenly required to have sexual intercourse with someone she has only met twice before. She describes the experience of her husband Israel bluntly placing himself on top of her and attempting to penetrate her as 'either too real or completely fake' (Abraham, 1995: 252). Rachel is unable to place sex within a context that makes sense to her; all her life she has been alienated from her own sexuality, taught to be ashamed and guilty, never thinking about it and now suddenly she has to be penetrated by a relative stranger. The act is unsuccessful because Israel, being a virgin who presumably only has very little knowledge of how sex works, is unable to penetrate his wife before light begins to come through the window and he has to cease his activities, since it is only allowed

in the dark. It is a serious failure, as consummating the marriage is a crucial part of the marriage ceremony and without it you are not actually married.

The consequences are rather awkward, as Israel will now have to discuss this situation with Rachel's father. Rachel can guess the conversation that will take place and it deeply disturbs her: '. . . I think about Father's advice, telling Israel how to do it properly, how to penetrate me, his daughter. Why not have him in bed with us, to show us, to just do it to me, and what then do I need Israel for, lying in bed uselessly beside me?' (Abraham, 1995: 258) Israel cannot talk about his sexual problems with his wife, because that would be sinful, but he can with her father, the rabbi. This quotation has obvious Freudian undertones, which are probably intentional. It is a good example of how Abraham does not overtly superimpose her own views of Hasidism on the text, but criticises Hasidism by illustrating the most problematic aspects and letting the reader make up her own mind.

From the first day after the wedding it becomes clear that Israel is simply a puppet controlled by Rachel's parents. Her illusions of breaking free from their control and being able to make her own decisions as a married woman are shattered. Yet, Rachel finds it easier to stand up to her husband than it was to her parents: 'I look at him. He thinks he can tell me what to do, that he is taking Father's place. He thinks that because he's a man, I'll listen' (Abraham, 1995: 263). Rachel never saw much validity in the legal power men hold in Orthodox Judaism and she did not plan to obey her husband. It dawns on Rachel that Israel only married her in order to be close to her father, to be part of a rabbinic family. Jacobowitz remarks: 'through her body, [the groom's family] are able to have access to a connection with her father's mind' (Jacobowitz, 2004: 83–4). As Rachel suspected, Israel discusses all the details of their continuing failed sex life with her father, who in turn tries his best to control the situation and make his daughter lose her virginity. After the young couple visits Israel's parents, Israel turns to Rachel, "I know your father will say it's important that we're home Sunday night", he says, and then I understand. Father wants him to consummate our marriage before my period begins. This is why it's important that we're home Sunday night. I decide to say I'm menstruating when he comes to my bed'

(Abraham, 1995: 277). A law that was created to control the female body, a man may not touch a woman during the time that she is menstruating,¹⁸ is here used against Israel (the source of patriarchal power over Rachel) out of recalcitrance.

Eventually Rachel manages to leave Israel (she escapes him on a bus) and return home to her parents, a divorced woman. The *get* was probably not that difficult to obtain since the marriage was never consummated. Israel most likely understood that he received much more than he had bargained for. Now Rachel is divorced, her mother openly calls her ex-husband a *tembale*, derived from the word '*tam*' which means a 'fool' or a man 'wholeheartedly for God'. Her family had pitied Rachel for being married to an idiot, but they would only have seen her as an unfortunate sacrifice. As all women have to make their peace with their marriage, regardless of how unhappy it makes them. Back home Rachel finally plans the escape she had always dreamt of, but where she will go or what will become of her the reader does not find out.

A novel that shares similar themes to *The Romance Reader* is *Hush* (2010) by Eishes Chayil, the pen name of Judy Brown. *Eishes chayil*, meaning 'woman of valour', is a poem that is sung at the beginning of the Shabbat to honour Jewish women in the home. It is also an important concept in Hasidic Judaism, an *eishes chayil* is the perfectly selfless, caring mother and wife; she is a martyr for her family, dedicating each minute to the physical and spiritual well-being of her husband and children. This type of (fictional) woman is praised and honoured, held up as an (impossible) standard for all Jewish women. Publishing a novel that could be seen as a scandalous expose of a Hasidic community under that name is therefore quite a bold move.

Brown, like Abraham, was raised in a Hasidic community and she wrote the book while she was still a Hasidic Jew, but she has left her community since. Brown has been reticent about which sect she belonged to, the Ger Hasidim, because of the sensitive nature of her book. Her novel portrays a fictional Hasidic group called the 'Yushive' Hasidim, chosen because the actions the book recounts, the sexual molestation of a

¹⁸ *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*. Niddah 2a, 1. <http://halakhah.com/pdf/taharoth/Nidah.pdf>. This whole tractate deals with menstruating women, 'nidahs', it is one of the most serious ethical matters in the whole Talmud.

young girl who commits suicide, are based on true events. The author has said in an essay published by *The Huffington Post*: 'I accidentally learned what the words molestation and rape meant at age 23, after telling a therapist I met about something I had witnessed happening to a friend when we were children' (Brown, 2011: n. pag.). This forms the inspiration for the major narrative plot line in the novel, which, like *The Romance Reader*, follows a young girl through her childhood and adolescence.

The narrator, Gittel, who is about nine at the beginning of the novel, grows up near Borough Park, in Flatbush, close to where her best friend, Devory, lives. The first part of the book alternates between the years 2000 and 2008, between the events leading up to Devory's suicide and its aftermath. This covers Gittel's experiences as a child (in 2000), her letters to Devory written in 2008 and her testimony to the police in that same year. The second part of the book (2008–2010) narrates the beginning of Gittel's married life and her coming to terms with the reason for her best friend's suicide. Gittel's other best friend is her neighbour Kathy, who is a Christian. Kathy had suffered a nervous breakdown 10 or 20 years before and had never been the same since, but Gittel liked her because 'she was the only adult who was still a child, and she never lied, which all adults did' (Chayil, 2010: 9). For some reason, Gittel's parents reluctantly condone visits to Kathy, even though Gittel grows up believing that all *goyim* are filled with evil and even non-Hasidic Jews are to be regarded with suspicion.

Gittel is not quite sure whether *goyim* are actually evil, she is still waiting for her neighbours to do something evil in front of her, but to her Hasidic Jews are unmistakably different from non-Hasidim and non-Jews. For instance, she is convinced that Hasidim do not fall in love; this is a strange thing that only non-Jews do. Even when Gittel is 17, an age where most people are familiar with the concept if not the feeling, she is entirely confused when Kathy talks about love: 'I was bewildered. "Do gentiles have a deadline for falling in love? Like we have to get married. Is not falling in love a terrible thing? Like for us not getting married?"' (Chayil, 2010: 34). Hasidic marriages are not based on the idea of romantic love. As Fader explains: 'At the heart of arranged marriages is a Hasidic critique of their perception of Gentile and secular

families. This critique focuses on what Hasidic women suggest is an immature belief that marriage is about individuals rather than family status, about the selfish fulfilment of passions rather than the commitment to building real love through religious discipline' (Fader, 2009: 179–80). Family status is considered more important than personal happiness, peculiar from a modern point-of-view, but of course the situation was similar for non-Jewish aristocratic and upper-class families up until quite recently. One can be excused for being reminded of Jane Austen when reading about Hasidic matchmaking. Yet, at the same time, Hasidim believe in the ultra-romantic idea of 'the One': 'In matchmaking practices women and girls search out their *basherte* "predestined mate" (by God)' (Fader, 2009: 180). This seems rather paradoxical. Essentially, one's *basherte* is the most socially prestigious boy or girl the family can barter for, but this person is already (unbeknownst to you) picked out for you by God.

Fader describes the concept of 'true Jewish love':

as the wedding nears, girls attend formal classes for brides. Here they are taught that true Jewish love comes from a girl's ability to discipline her own body and desires as she assumes her new religious responsibilities for the laws of family purity (*tahares-hamishpukhe*), which regulate conjugal intimacy based on the woman's menstrual cycle. (Fader, 2009: 180)

Thus, 'true love' depends entirely on a woman's capability to abstain from sleeping with her husband for two weeks of every month. That is how Hasidic love is supposedly created. If you fail to fall in love with your husband it must be because there is something wrong with you or you are not obeying the laws around *tahares-hamishpukhe* to the minutest detail. For if a woman does obey these laws, this will lead to 'an intimacy and friendship with their husbands that Gentiles and the secular can't even imagine' (Fader, 2009: 180). That explains why Gittel does not believe that Hasidim just 'fall' in love: love comes from God and/or is manufactured by correctly following the law.

Even though Gittel knows that marrying a nice Jewish boy is her destiny, like Rachel in *The Romance Reader* she feels apprehensive towards the idea of marriage.

Unlike Rachel, she is able to discuss her worries and reservations with her father who actually listens to her, "'Totty', I asked him, 'do I *have* to get married and have a baby when I grow up?'" "And Will I have to make supper every single day for the rest of my life?" ". . . why don't boys have babies also? The mothers could have half the babies and the father the other half. All boys do is wear a hat and have a *Bar Mitzvah*, why don't girls have *Bar Mitzvahs*?"' (Chayil, 2010: 84–5).¹⁹ Her father explains that: 'maybe it's because the boys do things afterward that girls don't, like wearing a hat, putting on the *tefillin* every morning, and *davening* and learning all day' (Chayil, 2010: 84–5). Gittel considers this and realises that there are definite downsides to either gender; in fact, she believes that it might be easier to be a girl, or at least more fun, as boys are not allowed to do anything other than studying and praying.

Being a teenage girl also confuses Gittel, especially when her mother explains to her that she will need sanitary pads for when she begins menstruating. Gittel is frightened by the idea and confused by the enormous choice in pads, convinced that she will need all of them: 'I needed all those maxis, because one could not know what unexpected circumstances might require the Extra Heavy pad or the Flexiest-of-Wings as I lay somewhere and died a sad and lonely death' (Chayil, 2010: 90). Similarly, Gittel is baffled when her 13-year-old cousin tells her that they could not be in the same room together because his rabbi had told him that that is how babies happen. Her mother absolutely refused to tell her why her cousin has said this. Gittel will not know how menstruation, babies and men are connected until a few weeks before her wedding. As a girl she is kept ignorant, because knowledge can only damage her.

Gittel's non-existent knowledge of sexual intercourse means that when Devory is raped right in front of her in the same room in which Gittel is sleeping, she has no idea what has happened, only that Devory's brother hurt her in some way. The text suggests that Devory suffered sexual abuse from her brother for years and she displayed many warning signs: she consistently tried to run away from home to stay with Gittel and her family when her brother was home from *yeshiva*. She wrote notes to her parents saying, 'I want to die'. She wandered around school in a daze, deeply absorbed in a book,

¹⁹ There is no *bat mitzvah* for Hasidic girls.

disconnected from her environment. She wanted to play games such as 'killing things' or jumping off roofs. All of this behaviour is simply labelled as 'naughty' and 'rebellious' by the adults who pay no attention to her cries for help. When Devory's mother finally asks Gittel why Devory is acting so strangely and Gittel tells her about Shmuli going into Devory's room and doing things under her blanket, Devory's mother only responds by being angry. She asks Gittel whether this was just something Devory had told her or whether Gittel had seen it. Gittel is scared because Devory's mother is so angry, hence she says that she did not see it, but Devory told her. Consequently, Devory's mother decides that it is easier to pretend that Devory is making up crazy stories than actually contemplating the fact that Devory told Gittel the truth.

There is another issue: although it is safe to assume that Hasidic Jews view the rape of a child as immoral, the Torah and the Talmud are anything but clear on this case. The Talmud explicitly forbids incest (Sanhedrin 53 a–b) and the rape of a married woman (Sanhedrin 73a), but the discussion of rape or sexual intercourse with children is rather muddled. Usually these dialogues are held within different legal contexts; there is no straightforward discussion about whether having sex with a young child is ethical or moral. First of all, Ketubot 40a states that when a minor is raped no fine needs to be paid,²⁰ implying that this crime is not as serious as the rape of a woman who is of age. More disturbingly, engaging in sexual intercourse with a girl below the age of three is not explicitly forbidden. She can still be considered a virgin, because a three-year old girl can regrow her hymen ('it is as if one puts the finger into the eye'),²¹ hence she has not incurred any real injury. Sanhedrin 54b makes a similar comment about sex with a young boy, if below the age of nine when he reaches sexual maturity (or according to Samuel, at the age of three); the act cannot be treated as 'pederasty' since the person is too young to engage in sexual intercourse.²²

²⁰ Although the minor can be married off to her rapist or sold into slavery. *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Ketubot 40a.

²¹ Tears will come into the eye again and again, a girl below the age of three can regrow her virginity after each time her hymen is broken.

²² *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Sanhedrin 54b, 244. <http://www.halakhah.com/pdf/nezikin/Sanhedrin.pdf>.

Apparently, the rapist cannot be blamed for his actions by such a young person, 'only he who is able to engage in sexual intercourse, may, as the passive subject of pederasty throw guilt [upon the active offender]; whilst he who is unable to engage in sexual intercourse cannot be a passive subject of pederasty [in that respect]'.²³ This means that the rapist is not liable and there is no penalty.

Furthermore, a girl of three (and one day) may be betrothed by intercourse,²⁴ which according to modern day standards would be equal to raping her. Although the Talmud condemns marital rape,²⁵ a three-year-old girl can be acquired thus because the Talmud does not acknowledge that three-year-olds cannot consent. Rachel Adler remarks that in a society where women are considered commodities rather than people, rape is 'simply an improper method of acquisition' (Adler, 1998: 130), which is probably the most succinct and astute observation of the Talmudic debate on rape. Moreover, it is not as though the rabbis of the Talmud did not understand that having sex with a young girl could cause her great physical pain, because they make a distinction between the time given to a pre-pubescent girl to recover from her wedding night (four nights) and an adolescent girl (one night).²⁶ They understand that a pre-pubescent girl may become wounded during intercourse and this wound needs time to heal. It is just something the girl must endure. In short, the sexual abuse of minors is simply accepted as a fact of life, which makes it so problematic.

When Devory commits suicide by hanging herself in Gittel's bathroom, her parents pretend their daughter had always been 'different' and 'strange' in order to spare their son. They already lost Devory, if they were to admit to their son's crime, they would probably lose him too. Moreover, since Shmuli is a boy, he was always the more important child; he could gain honour for his family by being a gifted Talmud scholar. All Devory could do was keep in line, acquire a respectable husband and bear

²³ 54b 244.

²⁴ *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Nidah 44b 208. <http://www.halakhah.com/pdf/taharoth/Nidah.pdf>. Also Kiddushin 10a, 25. <http://halakhah.com/pdf/nashim/Kiddushin.pdf>.

²⁵ *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Eiruvin 100b 466. <http://www.halakhah.com/pdf/moed/Eiruvin.pdf>.

²⁶ *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Ketuboth 6a, 19. <http://www.halakhah.com/rst/nashim/25a%20-%20Kesuvos%20-%202a-28b.pdf>.

him sons. Devory disappointed her parents by not being a good, obedient Hasidic girl and then she committed suicide. Shmuli is now their only hope, hence everything revolves around keeping up appearances at any cost. Gittel tells her parents in front of the police why Devory kept running away from home; her testimony could have helped to send Shmuli to jail, but Gittel's mother persuades her father to keep quiet and prevent Gittel from talking to the police. Gittel's mother is only worried about her daughter's reputation and how being involved in this police case will affect her marriage prospects.

Even when Gittel finally goes to the police, years later, she decides to wait until she is married before signing the contract needed to officially file the report with her testimony, which is to happen as soon as Gittel is 18. The police officer asks her if she wants to get married: 'That question. Always that question. "I want my parents to love me", I said. "I don't have anywhere else to go. I don't want to leave"' (Chayil, 2010: 215). It may be clear from Gittel's answer that she does not actually want to get married; she just sees this as something that must happen, unless she chooses to leave the community which would mean losing her family and friends. These are her only two options. In a letter to Devory, Gittel writes: 'They say that as long as one is unmarried, one is really only half-way done. It is funny to think of oneself like that, only half-done. . . It is strange to think that there is a Chassid I don't know who I will raise a family with. But it seems that everyone does it, that is the only way for things to happen' (Chayil, 2010: 68). Although Gittel is not as anxious about the idea of marriage as Rachel, she also sees it as inevitable. Everyone does it; there is no escape. Besides, girls are taught that they are not 'complete' until they are married, brainwashed into believing that being married is the only state an adult woman can be.

The biological facts of sexual intercourse are explained to Gittel in the last bridal class for Hasidic brides-to-be, but she does not actually fully comprehend sex. That is not surprising considering what she was taught. The main lesson she received was that 'it' only serves the sacred purpose of procreation and 'you must always remember [that] the holy presence is there, right with you' (Chayil, 2010: 247). 'It was something Gittel should submit herself to "with a prayer on [her] lips and fear in [her] heart",

(Chayil, 2010: 248). Her teacher emphasised that 'the most important part of *it* is that during *it* one must pray with all one's power that one's children should be blessed by Hashem and the *Rebbe* and the angels' (Chayil, 2010: 248, emphasis in original). The description Gittel received is midway between some sort of human sacrifice and a religious service. According to the rules, there cannot be any intimacy, foreplay, affection, pillow talk, kissing, exploration, romance, passion, pleasure, since all of that is frivolous, lustful and forbidden.²⁷ There is penetration and prayer; that is all. Essentially, the Hasidic woman sacrifices her body to her new husband and her God, in order to become a vessel for future generations of Hasidic Jews.

Gittel leaves her class scared and confused since she has always been under the impression that Hasidic Jews do not have intercourse, they use artificial insemination; fornication is for the *goyim*. Besides, the police officer taking her testimony had explained to Gittel that it was rape when a man tried to force his penis into a woman: 'I had never known there were two different kinds: one like *that* and one to have babies' (Chayil, 2010: 249, emphasis in original). Gittel's apprehension is understandable, since sex without affection, foreplay or pleasure is somewhat like rape as a woman's body is not ready for penetration without sexual arousal, hence a man will have to use force and most likely hurt his wife. Gittel's first experience of sex might not be that different from Devory's, except she implicitly consents to having intercourse with her husband because she has married him. As mentioned previously, the rabbis of the Talmud expected a woman to get hurt as part of the process, which is why they would permit one day of recovery before the husband would be allowed to have sex with his wife again.²⁸ A woman's physical or emotional discomfort, the fact that she is injured in the process, is of zero consequence.

Gittel's husband Yankel is completely ignorant regarding women's bodies, even after he has had intercourse with a woman. A couple of days after he marries his bride he finds one of her bras hanging to dry in the bathroom and he is outraged

²⁷ Although it is up to the discretion of the couple to follow these rules and there may be a difference in how strict sexual laws are depending on the Hasidic branch.

²⁸ *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Ketuboth 6a, 19. <http://www.halakhah.com/rst/nashim/25a%20-%20Kesuvos%20-%202a-28b.pdf>.

since he had always believed that only *goyishe* women have breasts. Being a good Hasidic husband, he did not take Gittel's nightgown off on their first wedding night and hence he did not notice that his wife indeed has breasts. Gittel tries to convince her husband that Hasidic women also have breasts, all women do, but Yankel maintains that there was no way his mother and sister also had 'that'. Gittel explains that breasts are for feeding babies but this makes Yankel only more offended: 'Yankel stared at me as though I was insane and said there were cows for a reason, and a *Chassidish* woman would never let her child view such "things" and maybe just in America they had "that". Things were a bit more modern here, and that in Israel, forget about it, if a woman had "that" she would never be able to make a *shidduch*' (Chayil, 2010: 272). Only when Yankel spoke to his rebbe about the matter could he accept that Hasidic women were also 'allowed' to have breasts. Evidently, Gittel and Yankel's warped, indoctrinated minds are completely divorced from anything sexual or related to the body. It also illustrates how a woman's word about her own body is ignored and dismissed; one needs a male rabbi to pronounce what is correct and lawful considering a woman's sexual organs.

Yankel makes another faux pas when he tries to kiss Gittel, who, in horror at his sinful, *goyishe* behaviour, flees to the bathroom. Gittel is in fact so distressed she calls up Yankel's rabbi in order to ask advice: he recommends Gittel to have sex with her husband three times a month instead of just twice. A rabbi needs to be consulted in all matters, even when it comes to sexual intimacy, since there are strict rules that dictate every aspect of life. The rabbi does not say that Yankel is allowed to kiss Gittel, he is gentle but he does not approve of it. In Hasidic Judaism, sex is viewed as sticking a key into a baby-machine, there is no need to kiss the machine first, that would just be weird and forbidden. Of course, some couples may ignore the rules they were taught in their pre-marital classes, but problems can arise when one of the two is willing to bend the rules a little and their spouse is not (Mintz, 2009: 232–3). All in all, sex is something Gittel feels she has to endure rather than something she can enjoy. One night, right after Gittel found a picture of Devory; she even has a panic attack, while Yankel is performing his husbandly duty. Gittel finally understands what Devory must have felt when Shmuli came into her bed. All of the

suppressed trauma surrounding Devory's rape (which Gittel had witnessed) and her death come flooding back. This jolts her into action.

When Gittel discovers she is pregnant, she announces that the baby, if it is a girl, will be called Devory. Yankel is not pleased and states that he does not want his child named after a girl who committed suicide and 'was probably already crazy to begin with' (Chayil, 2010: 314). Although Gittel explained Devory's rape to Yankel, he clearly never took it seriously. Why lend credence to a woman's words? In true misogynistic fashion he blames the victim for the perpetrator's deeds. Gittel's parents accuse her of being insane when she tells them she wants to name her child Devory and visit Devory's grave to ask for her blessing. Everyone seems to blame Devory for her suicide and treats her like a nuisance who, if she didn't deserve her death, also didn't *not* deserve it. In response Gittel smashes a cup, her husband Yankel walks out of the Shabbath celebrations and her mother screams at her: "What is wrong with you, ruining your marriage? Over what? *Because a little girl died?*" (Chayil, 2010: 320, emphasis in original). Again, Gittel's mother makes it clear that Gittel's first and foremost responsibility is protecting her marriage, at any cost.

In the end, their rabbi makes Yankel see sense; however Yankel's acknowledgement of the tragedy of Devory's death is not enough for Gittel. She decides that her story must be published, so that everyone will know the truth. Yankel tells her that this cannot be done: "you can't change the fibres of the community. Even men can't, and you. . . you are just a young woman. It is you who must listen to them" (Chayil, 2010: 333). Gittel ignores Yankel's patronising advice and decides to pressure the editor of the community newspaper into publishing one of her letters to Devory. She manages to persuade him and he publishes her letter, without the permission of the community's rabbis. The end of the novel sees Gittel as an activist in her community with a baby called Devory. Gittel has managed to carve out her own space in her community as both a good Hasidic wife and an activist, remaining true to her authentic self. It almost seems too good to be true, but we are reminded that this is a fictional account, not a biography.

Both novels paint a fairly bleak picture of Hasidic marital life; Rachel actually runs away from her husband to obtain a divorce and although Gittel's husband ultimately understands and supports her, their marriage seems to be one of convenience

at best. Both characters' experiences of sexual intercourse are rather grim as well; Gittel had a panic attack and Rachel found the whole experience just plain unpleasant and surreal. Neither of the women seem to experience the conjugal love and bliss that were promised to them. Being a wife and producing Jewish children are the most important duties of a Hasidic woman and should fill her with a sense of pride, comfort and joy, yet Rachel and Gittel struggle to find any happiness or satisfaction. *The Romance Reader* does not tell us Rachel's fate, but if she actually were to succeed in her big escape, it would mean cutting all ties with her past. You cannot choose to leave Satmar without saying goodbye to everyone you know and love. At the same time, most readers would very much question whether Rachel would ever be happy within a Satmar Hasidic environment, being a Satmar wife. Gittel's future in her community seems more secure as long as she is modest in her boundary pushing. Yet, both endings are unresolved, reflecting the feelings of both authors towards the place of women within Hasidic Judaism.

Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that both authors left their own communities. Abraham had already left when she wrote *The Romance Reader* and Judy Brown left after she revealed herself to be the author of *Hush* following a sexual abuse case in a Brooklyn Hasidic community. Although few Hasidic women are encouraged or even allowed to write fiction for a wider audience beyond their own communities, it would be interesting to analyse accounts of women who do feel perfectly happy and at home in their role of the Hasidic *eishes chayil*, in order to review a more diverse selection of literary representations.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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