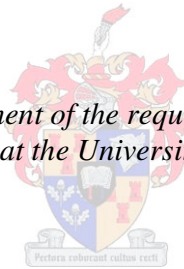


“Stealing the Story, Salvaging the She”: Feminist Revisionist Fiction and the Bible

by
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Declaration

By submitting this thesis/dissertation electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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Abstract

This thesis analyses six novels by different women writers, each of which rewrites an originally androcentric biblical story from a female perspective. These novels are *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant, *The Garden* by Elsie Aidinoff, *Leaving Eden* by Ann Chamberlin, *The Moon under her Feet* by Clysta Kinstler, *The Wild Girl* by Michelle Roberts and *Wisdom's Daughter* by India Edghill. By classifying these novels as feminist revisionist fiction, this study considers how they both subvert and revise the biblical narratives they are based on in order to offer readers new and gynocentric alternatives. With the intention of establishing the significance of such an endeavor, the study therefore employs the findings of feminist critique and theology to expose how the Bible, as a sexist text, has inspired, directly or indirectly, many of the patriarchal values that govern Western society and religion. Having established how biblical narratives have promoted and justified visions of women as marginal, subordinate and outside the realm of the sacred, we move on to explore how feminist rewritings of such narratives might function to challenge and transform androcentric ideology, patriarchal myth and phallogocentric theology. The aim is to show that the new and different stories constructed within these revisionist novels re-conceptualise and re-imagine women, their place in society and their relation to the divine. Thus, as the title suggests, this thesis ultimately considers how women writers 'steal' the original biblical stories and transform them in ways that prove liberating for women.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis analiseer ses romans deur verskillende vroue skrywers - romans wat die oorspronklik androsentriese bybelse stories herskryf vanuit 'n vroulike perspektief. Die romans sluit in *The Red Tent* deur Anita Diamant, *The Garden* deur Elsie Aidinoff, *Leaving Eden* deur Ann Chamberlin, *The Moon under her Feet* deur Clysta Kinstler, *The Wild Girl* deur Michelle Roberts en *Wisdom's Daughter* deur India Edghill. Deur hierdie romans te klassifiseer as feministiese revisionistiese fiksie, oorweeg hierdie studie hoe hulle die bybelse verhale waarop hulle gebaseer is, beide ondermyn en hersien om sodoende lesers nuwe en ginosentriese alternatiewe te bied. Met die voorneme om die betekenisvolheid van so 'n poging vas te stel, wend hierdie tesis dus die bevindings van feministiese kritiek en -teologie aan om bloot te lê hoe die Bybel, as 'n seksistiese teks, baie van die patriargale waardes van die Westerse samelewing en godsdiens, direk of indirek, geïnspireer het. Nadat vasgestel is hoe bybelse verhale sienings van vroue as marginaal, ondergeskik en buite die sfeer van heiligheid bevorder en regverdig, beweeg die tesis aan om te ondersoek hoe feministiese herskrywings van sulke verhale, androsentriese ideologie, patriargale mite en fallosentriese teologie uitdaag en herskep. Die doelwit is om te wys dat die nuwe en anderste stories saamgestel in hierdie revisionistiese romans, vroue, hul plek in die samelewing en hul betrekking tot die goddelike, kan heroorweeg en herdink. Dus, soos die titel voorstel, oorweeg hierdie tesis primêr hoe vroue skrywers die oorspronklike bybelse stories 'steel' en herskep op maniere wat bevrydend vir vrouens blyk te wees.

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To My Matriarch
My Goddess
My Strong and Beautiful Mother

Since stories are the heart of tradition, we [can] question and create tradition by telling a new story within the framework of an old one.

- Judith Plaskow,
“The Coming of Lilith: Towards a Feminist Theology”

If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives... nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or experimentally call by another name.

- Adrienne Rich,
“When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Red Tent Phenomenon	page	1
Chapter 1: “His Story, Her Loss”: Reading the Bible as an Sexist Text		13
“‘That Is Why I Became a Footnote’”: Biblical ‘His Story’ and the Females Underfoot		14
“‘That’s Going To Be Hard To Escape’”: Prescriptive Texts and the Proper Place of Women		21
“‘It Is For Men To Come After [Christ]’”: A Sacred Text that Sanctifies Only Men		27
Chapter 2: “Repossessing Ideology”: From Biblical ‘His Story’ to Feminist ‘Her Story’		35
Section One: The Textual Strategies of Revisionist Fiction		36
<i>Female Characters as Protagonists: Confronting the Issue of Centrality</i>		36
<i>First- Person Narration and Character Embellishment: Obtaining Autonomy and Humanity</i>		43
<i>Ideological Dislocation: In Positions of Power</i>		50
Section Two: Feminist Desires and Feminist Utopias		56
<i>Wisdom’s Daughter as Feminist Utopian Fiction</i>		58
Chapter 3: “Rewriting the Story”: Genesis, Gender and Revisionist Mythmaking		65
Elsie Aidinoff’s <i>The Garden</i> and the Reversal of Genesis Gender Roles		67
<i>Rethinking the First Couple</i>		69
<i>The Alternative and Not-So-Biblical Eve</i>		71
Ann Chamberlin’s <i>Leaving Eden</i> as an Alternative Version of ‘The Beginning’		77
<i>The Original Eden</i>		78
<i>The Fall of Man</i>		81
Chapter 4: “Reclaiming the Sacred”: From Exclusive Theology to Inclusive Theology		87
Alternative Visions of Divinity: From God to Goddess		88
New Forms of Female Spirituality: From the Margin to the Centre		94
The Goddess’s Gift: Reclaiming the Female Body as Sacred Space		97
Conclusion:		107
List of Works Cited:		109

Introduction

The Red Tent Phenomenon

[*The Red Tent*] is the book that every author who writes about women of the bible wishes they had written. There is nothing like it before Anita Diamant or after. IT IS THE ONE.
-Bette B. Prater ¹

The feminist thinker who tinkers with biblical narratives puts herself in the position of Salman Rushdie's. She is pitting her own imagination against orthodoxy.
-Alicia Ostriker ²

In 1997 Anita Diamant wrote a rather controversial book titled *The Red Tent*. Taking as inspiration the story found in Genesis 34, it re-imagines the story of Dinah, that obscure biblical daughter who is merely a footnote in the tale of the biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, as Diamant admits in the *Reading Group Guide* made available by Barnes and Noble, the novel is a “radical departure from the historical text” and as such the tale it presents is very much unlike the one on which it is based. Focusing not only on Dinah, who is the narrator of the tale, but also on the marginal matriarchs who are her mother-aunts and grandmothers, *The Red Tent* reconstructs a gynocentric version of the biblical story and centres the narrative on a community of Goddess-worshipping women, their relationships, experiences and pre-patriarchal practices within the red menstrual tent from which the novel takes its name.

Initially, the novel was a complete failure, selling roughly 10 000 copies in its first year of release (Godes and Myzlin 1). However, as Diamant explains on her website, AnitaDiamant.com, the novel eventually caught on through word-of mouth and the combined efforts of informal reading groups, independent bookstores and female members of the clergy – some of whom “even

¹ Unfortunately this reader review has been removed from Amazon.com, so no reference can be provided.

² *Feminist Revision an the Bible*, page 121

[preached] about *The Red Tent* from the pulpit” – ensured that her novel became “publishing phenomenon” only four years after it was first published; by 2001 *The Red Tent* had sold over two million copies, had been published in 25 countries and had been translated into 20 different languages. Worldwide the novel struck a cord with women who passed it on to family and friends, discussed it in reading groups and – in the case of rabbis and pastors – recommended it to their congregations.

When I read *The Red Tent* for what would be the first of many times in 2007, ten years after its initial publication, I was unaware of its widespread appeal, but nonetheless struck by its lyricism and content. Romanced by the female-centred community it portrayed, the stories of motherhood, womanhood and the celebrated female body that filled its pages and particularly the powerful goddesses it depicted, I recommended it to other women without realising that I was perpetuating the word-of-mouth movement responsible for its best-seller status. *The Red Tent* became a personal favourite, but it wasn’t until much later that I considered it from an academic point of view.

What prompted my somewhat delayed academic interest in *The Red Tent* was a dual occurrence. While taking a feminism elective in 2008 I offered the book to my mother. At the time I was working on a paper on Marina Warner’s *Indigo*, considering it as a kind of matriarchal rewrite of Shakespeare’s patriarchal plot in *The Tempest*. The focus of that paper shed a new light on *The Red Tent* for when my mother complained that the story wasn’t exactly “biblically correct”, I critically considered what Diamant was doing for the first time and realized that, although she might have arrived at it from a different direction, she was in fact riding in the same revisionist boat as Marina Warner. Both authors were taking canonical and utterly patriarchal original texts and reworking them in an attempt to give readers feminist alternatives³.

Thus my interest in *Indigo* carried over to *The Red Tent* and I began to consider the novel as a form of revisionist fiction that was subverting the male voice and perspectives responsible for the biblical narrative, and offering readers the re-imagined stories, voices and experiences of the women largely ignored by that narrative. As I began serious research into this topic, however, I could find very

³ Interestingly enough, I later found that *Diamant* herself sees her novel as part of what she terms “a larger cultural shift in which women have re-appropriated the Bible and other texts” (qtd. in Rosen 30). According to Judith Rosen, Diamant recognizes that “*The Red Tent* fits squarely into the tradition of Marion Zimmer Bradley’s retelling of the Arthurian legend, *The Mists of Avalon*, or Sena Jeter Naslund’s *Ahab’s Wife: The Star-Gazer*, a reimagining of *Moby Dick* (Rosen 30).

little relevant academic material. Despite the obvious and wide-spread appeal of *The Red Tent* and the fact that it was sparking almost unparalleled interest and debate in women's readings groups and book discussion forums⁴, Diamant's novel was largely ignored by academia. My initial attempt at research was therefore limited to book reviews and to three academic articles, one by a literary professor concerned with the effects of first-person narration on teen readers, another by a theologian interested in the role of fiction in teaching theology to undergraduate students, and a third by a Jewish literary critic who, as a rabbi's wife, expressed concern at the novel's implications for Judaism. These sources all seemed to be picking up on the same issues that had initially caught my attention and yet they also served to raise further questions and so broadened the scope of my research.

The book reviews were filled with references to a gynocentric narrative that gave previously marginal biblical women centre stage. The *Booklist* referred to *The Red Tent* as "a saga of women" that "[brings] to life [the] women about whom the Bible tells us so little" (Cooper, "Religion" 284). Similarly, *The Los Angeles Times* suggested that "[b]y giving a voice to Dinah, one of the silent female characters in Genesis, the novel has struck a chord with women who may have felt left out of biblical history" (qtd. in *Reading Group Gold* 1). Highlighting the same aspect of the novel, *The Christian Science Monitor* commented on the fact that *The Red Tent* "create[d] a voice for [one] neglected woman, allowing her to tell ... her version" of the story as well as the stories of her mothers (Rubin 15). It was, however, this article's claim that we should classify the novel as "revisionist feminist history" as well as the *National Catholic Reporter's* suggestion that "readers with interests in biblical studies, women's issues and feminist readings of ancient texts and times" would find it appealing, that most closely corresponded to my own response to the text and that highlighted that there was more to the novel than the imaginary recovery of female characters and voices (Rubin 15; Redmont 28).

⁴ I think a clear indication of such an appeal is that up to date there are a staggering 1558 reader reviews on *The Red Tent* on Amazon, 1316 of which give it a higher than three star rating (out of five). This is more than the number of reviews for novels like Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* (451 reviews), Silvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (525 reviews), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (636 reviews) and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (685 reviews). Closest in popularity are Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (904 reviews), Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mist of Avalon* (924 reviews), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1053 reviews) and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1503 reviews).

As the *National Catholic Reporter's* review suggests, *The Red Tent* therefore also raises other women's issues and feminist concerns. In this regard, I found Professor Holly Blackfolk's article, subtitled "An Adolescent Bildungsroman in a Different Voice", particularly relevant. Although the article was initially aimed at documenting 16-to-18-year-old girls' responses to first-person narration in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and Mark Twain's *The Adventure's of Huckleberry Fin*, it recounts how these girls quickly steered the discussion toward *The Red Tent* – and then could not stop "gush[ing]" about the novel they had found on their mothers' bookshelves (Blackfolk 74). Blackfolk documents how the girls were quick to "critique the patriarchal cannon taught in school" and how they imagined "the perfect (fantasy) English class on *The Red Tent*, full of discussions of 'psychology' and an in-depth study of "myth, legend, and ancient cultures" (75). In her analysis of their responses she highlights how girls "[see] the significance of female points of view on old stories", how the novel is "understood as a fantasy of female community" and how it speaks to the young hearts who are "hungering for an exploration of female-centered myths, deities, worlds, and power-structures" (Blackfolk 78, 84, 75). Significantly Blackfolk also draws attention to the novel's representation of "[ritualised] female fertility" as well as the female body and its powers, and seems to suggest that, in contrast to current discourses, *The Red Tent* might educate girls about the wonder of their own bodies (77-78).

Blackfolk's article confirmed that teenage girls were being captivated by the same women-centred stories, images and ideas that had initially sparked my own interest in the novel. As I later discovered, the novel's widespread appeal for older readers (who were picking up on and commenting on similar topics) stemmed from a comparable fascination with gynocentric content and the realization that it encouraged women to think about issues sidelined by the male canon. Consider for instance the following reader reviews from the Amazon.com:

This book makes you think even as it entertains you. It takes the Biblical stories (which are written from a male perspective) and views them from a female perspective. ("DreamMaker")

Holy moly ... I just finished reading *The Red Tent*... I am honest in saying that I could barely put this book down. It evoked emotion and vivid scenery that intrigues my mind. Just terrific. I can't wait to pass it on to friends. Tales of midwifery and love, passionate to the core. I would recommend this book to any woman, but essentially those that are intrigued by "life" and the miracle of birth. ("LaVoyce")

[Something] I liked about this book was the whole “red tent” business. For Dinah and her fellow women, [menstruation] was a time of togetherness, rest and celebration – not a solitary almost shameful thing like it is today. I thought that was kind of nice... *The Red Tent* is a thought-provoking read that brings to life an entire “hidden” world of the women of the Bible... there is a sense of mysticism throughout the book ... Yet it is firmly rooted in the real world as well – the hot, dusty world of women who lived in an ancient time and who didn’t really have a voice of their own. How lovely of Diamant to come along and give a voice to Dinah – to help us modern beings learn and think more about those who came before us... (“Jenners”)

I found the historical undertaking of what was a very matriarchal society among these women enthralling. The fact that women once upon a time were considered to be the source of life and therefore the source of power is something that I mourn being lost ... I think that when my daughter is older I would let her read this and I would also teach her to cherish the power in her... (“Movie Lover”)

This book... renews the strength of a woman’s heart. It lets many a female know that what she behold[s] is sacred. (“C. Johnson”)

These quotations suggest that *The Red Tent*- as another Amazon reader observes- “has given us a story where there was none” (“Dana C. Ahmad”). Whether that story is the story of the silenced and marginal biblical women, the story of female relationship and kinship, or the story of the sacredness and power of being female, the gynocentric novel’s appeal seems to stem from the fact that it has broken the ideological boundaries set by the phallogocentric and androcentric male canon to present women within an imagined female community, history, power and divinity. It is the construction of such a utopian and different story, and the potential it might hold for female readers, that therefore became the first major aspect of my research.

In speaking of the phallogocentric male canon, one must however confront the issue of Diamant’s tinkering with the Bible – that “book of books” from which “our theory and practice of canonicity derives” (Ostriker, *Feminist Revision* 27). Although reviewers and readers recognise the significance of the novel’s gynocentric content, most only connect this to the Bible by commenting on the novel’s recovery of a female characters and voices – those sidelined by the androcentric biblical text. And yet, seeing that the violation and subversion of the original text is an undeniable aspect of revision, my broadening research indicated that there was more to *The Red Tent*’s content and its intertextual relationship to the Bible than was popularly realised. Prompted by my mother’s concern that the novel was not “biblically correct”, I soon discovered that in spite of the novel’s overwhelmingly positive reception, there existed a minority of readers who rejected *The Red Tent*

for its clearly non-biblical plot and content. The following Amazon reviews give us a sense of their predicament:

I got no further than the second chapter... I was so revolted, I gave up....*The Red Tent* should carry a disclaimer ... [which states] that the characters and events in her book bear no resemblance to the characters and events in the Bible. (“Surak”)

Hogwash. [This was a] great opportunity to paint words about the life of women in Biblical times but... once she crossed the line from history to fiction she lost me. I now consider the entire book garbage and will strongly recommend against anyone I know reading [it]. I feel sorry for those who read it and think the Biblical truth can be found [in it]. Read Genesis instead... just as exciting, same characters but the truth can be found. (“M.Wells”)

[*The Red Tent*] was not biblical, had no biblical facts in it,...[it] was generally deplorable. Don't buy it, don't read it. It's trash. (“Maysie”)

The readers quoted here were apparently hoping for biblical fiction that was consistent with what they perceive to be the “facts” or “truths” found in the Bible. *The Red Tent* evidently did not meet that criterion. The readers’ obvious “[revulsion]” and rather summary dismissal of the novel as “trash” or “hogwash” therefore serves to display the level of offence taken at what Diamant freely admits was a deliberate attempt to *not* be “faithful” to this most seminal of original texts (qtd. in Wright 115). Another Amazon reader captures the reasoning behind such dismissive responses when she observes that “it is one thing for the author to ‘fill in the gaps’ and provide a work of fiction based on biblical fact, but it’s a whole other deal for the author to change the biblical fact to fit her work of fiction” (“Nomer15”). The reader ends by observing that such an endeavour is in fact “dangerous”.

In my attempt to incorporate such responses into my research, I found the article by theologian Caryn Riswold rather helpful (the second of the three academic articles mentioned above). Outlining her attempt to teach theology using popular fiction, she observes that while some students “found the text liberating and empowering” (like the majority of readers), others responded in the same way as the disgruntled readers quoted above: they “found the text to be nearly blasphemous, taking liberties with [sacred] scriptures which were both inappropriate and dangerous (Riswold 143). In explaining this response, she highlights “the role of fiction as it relates to [the authority of] scripture” and observes that “when fiction takes liberty with biblical characters or stories”, it questions the “inerrancy [and infallibility] of the scriptures” at some level, obviously fulfilling a

subversive function (Riswold 143). Riswold comments that such fiction introduces a “what if” element and facilitates “levels of discomfort” because it potentially “challenge[s]” what readers “already [believe]” (Riswold 143). In conclusion she accredits *The Red Tent* with the ability to raise questions and highlights its usefulness in teaching theology because it “opens up previously unconsidered notions or unchallenged assumptions about religion, the Bible, theology and faith for conversation and refinement” (Riswold 143).

The third critical article, by Simone Lotven Sofian, also proved useful with regard to this issue. Clearly unimpressed by the creative liberties taken by Diamant with regard to her depiction of the biblical matriarchs and their worship of goddesses – rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – Sofian feels that the *The Red Tent* both “undermines the Bible’s ultimate sacred character” and “leads women to question the truth of [a] monotheist Judaism” that (according to Diamant’s portrayal) denies us a “rich women’s heritage” (98, 102). She raises the concern that “success breeds imitation and influences attitudes” and warns that although it might be “only popular fiction”, Diamant’s novel has already “reached into the hearts and minds of [women]” (Sofian 96). Ultimately she ends her article by cautioning that *The Red Tent* “cannot be ignored as just a very popular, but inconsequential work of fiction” (Sofian 103).

Both these articles emphasise the novel’s ability to encourage questions and the fact that, by doing so, it undermines and subverts the ultimate authority and legitimacy of the biblical text. Like the satisfied readers who classify the novel as thought-provoking, these articles recognise its subversive potential. Thus the negative reader reviews added a new element to my research. Obviously *The Red Tent* was of consequence not simply because its revision of a biblical tale was giving readers a story filled with new and provocative ideas, but also because it was, in the process, undermining the old story and the ideas it propagated. These two overlapping aspects struck me as relevant to the “dual task” of feminist scholarship, which Green and Khan explain as the simultaneous “deconstruct[ion] [of] predominantly male cultural paradigms and reconstruct[ion] [of] a female perspective and experience in an effort to change ... tradition” (qtd. in Wilcox xiii). My question, however, was exactly which traditions and which cultural paradigms – or with reference to Riswold – which aspect of biblical religion, theology and faith *The Red Tent* was attempting to change through such a dual process?

As my research progressed, I became aware of the extent to which the Bible, with its almost exclusive focus on men and their covenant with a male God, had engendered not only the patriarchal assumptions central to our Western civilization, but also the phallogocentric theology responsible for women's religious marginalisation and social degradation. With this realisation, answers to the above research question began to suggest themselves. My hypothesis became clearer: should we reconsider *The Red Tent* not merely as historical fiction, but as revisionist feminist fiction? Taking into account its focus on women, their voices, their bodies and the Goddess, could we trace the ways in which it first subverted and then revised the sexist biblical ideas that have shaped the secular and religious traditions that define our society?

I was also interested to find out if *The Red Tent* was an isolated phenomenon, and soon discovered that, true to Sofian's warning that success breeds imitation, Diamant's novel had opened some sort of revisionist floodgate. As Ilene Cooper observes in an article for *Booklist*, "women of the Bible became fair game for writers of historical fiction" when *The Red Tent* became a best-seller:

At least since the runaway success of Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* in 1997, there has been another run on the biblical bank: heroines rescued from the paternalistic milieu of scripture are given new life in a quasi-feminist context. After Diamant opened the flaps of her tent, more and more women of the Bible keep finding new and self-assertive lives in the pages of historical fiction ("After The Red Tent" 1134).

Predictably, my first search on Amazon.com left me with a plethora of novels taking as their focus the lives of one or other usually recognisable, but often obscure, female figure from biblical history. Many writers, such as India Edgehill, Eva Etzioni-Halevy and Francine Rivers, were in fact making careers out of this type of fiction. Although this is by no means true of them all, several of these novels also affirmed both Sofian's and Cooper's assumptions regarding *The Red Tent*'s status as trend-setter by claiming kinship to Diamant's novel. The front cover of Marek Halter's *Sarah* (2004), for instance, quoted a review that declared it "a worthy heiress to the *The Red Tent*", while promotion material for India Edgehill's *Queenmaker* (2003) encouraged readers to "think *The Red Tent*, only much better". Similarly both Eve Etzioni-Helevy's *The Song of Hannah* (2005) and Anne Provoost's *In the Shadow of the Ark* (2001) had covers stating that they had been written "in the tradition of *The Red Tent*". Whether or not this association with *The Red Tent* was declared, there was obviously a large number of recent novels that had rewritten biblical stories from a

female perspective and that hovered tentatively at the intersection between women's historical fiction and revisionist feminist fiction.

It was to such a wide selection of novels like *The Red Tent* that I turned my attention in 2009, hoping to find novels that I could indeed classify as revisionist feminist fiction. Paying particular attention to the inclusion of a Goddess-figure (something I felt was central to the idea of biblical revision), I eventually selected five novels: *Wisdom's Daughter* (2004) by India Edghill, *The Garden* (2004) by Elsie Aidinoff, *Leaving Eden* (1999) by Ann Chamberlin, *The Moon under her Feet* (1989) by Clysta Kinstler and *The Wild Girl* (1984) by Michelle Roberts. With the exception of *The Wild Girl*,⁵ these novels – like *The Red Tent* – had never been recognised as anything more than trivial works of popular fiction and yet, whether it was with regard to their plot or their content, I felt that each of these novels offered readers a new story that contrasted with that of the original and its exegesis. What further struck me as significant was that three of the six novels were written before *The Red Tent* had achieved best-seller status. This suggested that their inspiration had come from elsewhere.

By the time I made this discovery, my research on the Bible had familiarised me with women's spirituality movement. This movement had developed as an outgrowth of the secular Women's Movement during the seventies and had become increasingly popular during the eighties⁶. Catherine Pastore Blair defines the women's spirituality movement as one which has “engaged an array of thinkers... in the task of rewriting religion in the light of women's experiences and desires” (qtd. in Ostriker, *Feminist Revision* 10). Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, however, gives a more detailed account by pointing out that the Women's Movement resulted in the development of a feminist consciousness in theological and cultural-religious studies. This, in turn, led to the

⁵ Written by an already established and recognised writer of feminist fiction, Michelle Robert's *The Wild Girl* had received some attention from academia. Although Caroline Guerin's article “Rewriting the Gospel” highlights that *The Wild Girl* “grapples with many of the problems confronting feminist theologians” and Heather Walton's “Revision and Revelation” considers how it “produces visions of female spirituality that are challenging to patriarchal values”, the novel has, however, never been considered as part of a wider revisionist movement (40; 90).

⁶ In spite of the fact that individual works of feminist theology or feminist biblical scholarship have been around since at least the publication of Elizabeth Candy Staton's *The Woman's Bible* in 1895, Ursula King, William Oddie and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza all agree that it was not until the early 1970s that feminist theology emerged as a collective ‘movement’ and that the manifold publications that followed Mary Daly's critical work *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) began to influence the development of feminist theological thinking outside of America.

emergence of the field of feminist studies in religion and feminist theology, which aims to “fundamentally [alter] the nature of malestream⁷ knowledge about the Divine”, “[seek] full citizenship for [women] in church and society” and “[reformulate] the study of scripture, tradition, theology, and community in feminist terms” (*Sharing Her Word* 4). Given their representations of a Divine Feminine, their repositioning of the previously marginalised and silenced biblical women and the fact that they were in effect rewriting scripture – reconceptualising its stories in the light of women’s experiences – I felt that I could locate these novels within this such a feminist movement in religion and spirituality⁸.

In light of this observation, this thesis does not aim to consider *The Red Tent* and novels like it. Rather it considers six different revisionist novels, all of which subvert and revise a biblical tale that originally propagates social and religious paradigms problematic for women. My premise is that these novels form part of the women’s spirituality movement, aimed at women’s liberation, and that we might read them as popular embodiments of a feminist theology that is still largely “isolated in the ivory tower of academia” (Slee 7). Over and above their potential for feminist developments in women’s spirituality, however, I think it is also important to point out that when these novels meddle with the biblical narratives, they are in a sense ‘rewriting’ what, according to many scholars, is “one of the founding texts of patriarchy” (Davies 9). One might therefore also locate these revisionist novels within the more secular gynocritical literary movement that John Wilcox describes as the feminist attempt to “critique, demystify, subvert, and revise” the androcentric stories and myths on which our patriarchal culture is structured (8).⁹ Thus it is that the following chapters are an attempt to trace the manner in which six novels, initially classified as historical or biblical fiction, might indeed be classified as feminist revisionist fiction for the manner in which they firstly subvert, critique and demystify the biblical stories responsible for patriarchal practice in both secular society and religious institutions, and secondly, present gynocentric fictional

⁷ Fiorenza admits to having “taken over” this expression from the feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith. She uses it as a “descriptive term indicating that throughout the centuries (and still today) biblical interpretation and scholarship is defined by elite, mostly European and American men” (*Sharing Her Word* 187).

⁸ This might, of course, explain why *The Red Tent* has had such a positive reception from female pastors and rabbis.

⁹ Although the term ‘gynocentric’ is a neologism originally coined by Elaine Showalter in an article titled “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” in 1981, I’ve used John Wilcox’s definition of the term because I found that it spoke to my own idea of what these novels were achieving in the process of rewriting biblical tales.

alternatives which serve to popularise both a feminist ideology and feminist theology that might prove liberating and empowering for women.

To this end Chapter One outlines the ways in which the biblical text is implicated in the sexist paradigms that have defined western society and religion. Relying on Diamant's *The Red Tent*, Aidinoff's *The Garden* and Roberts' *The Wild Girl* to structure the argument, it will consider key passages from each novel in order to highlight the implications of the Bible as a cultural-historical artefact reflective of the ideology of its time, as a prescriptive text that has shaped traditional myths regarding gender roles, and finally as a sacred manuscript which has legitimised the phallogocentric theology responsible for women's religious exclusion and marginalisation. Although the implications of each of these three 'functions' are very much inter-related, the three following chapters each consider how, by offering us new and different stories, the selected novels are able to address and revise the sexist ideology, myths and theology legitimised by the original biblical stories.

Chapter Two is concerned with the androcentric ideology of the original stories that marginalise women and portray them as one-dimensional helpmeets and insignificant 'others'. The first section explores the textual strategies employed by writers to undermine and revise the biblical ideology of the original narratives, while the second section draws on theory regarding utopian fiction to consider how such revised stories might help readers question the patriarchal logic of their own society. While Chapter Two pays closer attention to literary devices like narration and setting, Chapter Three broadens the scope to explore how these novels transform the very nature and meaning of the stories they revise. Through close readings of Chamberlin's *Leaving Eden* and Aidinoff's *The Garden*, both of which rewrite the story of the creation and fall found in Genesis 1-3, Chapter Three considers how, by changing the dynamics of the story itself, writers are able to subvert and revise the very myths on which the legitimacy of patriarchal and phallogocentric social structures are based. Finally, Chapter Four turns to the question of theology and traces the images of goddesses, female participants and sacred practices concerned with the female body in order to suggest that these revised stories by women writers— instead of relegating them to the margins of religious practices dominated by men—in fact offer female readers a new and inclusive, feminist theology.

Rather than discuss each text's failures and successes, I have tried to give a sense of the common trends that link them and constitute a literary movement aimed at women's social and religious liberation. I have discussed only a small selection of the available novels and I have touched on only the most prominent topics. I hope nevertheless that the ideas that are explored in the following chapters will have the same liberating effect on readers as they had on me, and that this will encourage further exploration of this literary trend and the social and spiritual movements at its heart.

1

His Story, Her Loss: Reading the Bible as an Sexist Text

Thoth, Hermes, the stylus,
the palette, the pen, the quill endure,
though our books are a floor
of smouldering ash under our feet.

In the beginning
was the word

-H.D. ¹

If we want to know how woman
relates to patriarchal tradition, it makes
logical sense to go to the Bible,
which is the founding text of patriarchy.

-Alicia Ostriker ²

Taking the above quote by Alicia Ostriker as inspiration, the following chapter aims to trace the manner in which the Bible as a prescriptive text has justified patriarchal and to some extent misogynistic tendencies that have limited women in both the social and religious sphere. This is very important, for as Davies suggests, we must first become aware of “how deeply implicated in an oppressive ideology” scripture is before we can really “resist the ideology” of the text and view it from the critical position necessary to realise the importance of change (83, 13). In order to expose the problematic ideology of the Biblical text, I will not only draw on various works of feminist theory, theology and critique, but also on three different revisionist novels, namely Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent*, Elsie Aidinoff’s *The Garden* and Michelle Roberts’ *The Wild Girl*. By following such a strategy this chapter has a dual aim. First and most importantly, it will serve a theoretical purpose, providing a summary of the feminist biblical critique that may help us discover why the revisionary practice of turning old biblical narratives into new feminist fiction is such a significant endeavour. Secondly, it will serve as my first foray into textual analysis since the way

¹ Qtd. in Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, page 73.

² *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, page 121.

that I draw on these three texts will not only function to structure the chapter, but also show how they in themselves critique and demystify the Bible even as they rewrite it.

“That Is Why I Became a Footnote”: Biblical ‘His Story’ and the Females Underfoot

Over the ages, the Bible has been predominantly read as a religious text – as the infallible word of God, to be exact. Consequently, because it has been understood as documenting divine will and decree, the Bible has also functioned as a prescriptive text and has per se inspired most of the values of western society, which are built upon the Christian beliefs of its European founders. However, and herein lies the crux of it, apart from its religious importance, the Bible is also a cultural-historical artefact that documents “a succession of [patriarchal] societies, over a period of roughly 1200 years” – a document “written by men, about men, to promote male propaganda” (Murphy 4; Japinga 35). Thus, before we turn to consider the implications of the Bible being read prescriptively as the sacred word of God, we will first consider it as a androcentric historical document predominantly concerned with the stories and interests of men. To this end, I will draw on Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent*, for, as will be shown, it is exactly this androcentric nature of biblical history that Diamant problematises when at the onset of her tale, she both highlights the absence of women’s stories and theorises its implications. Let us consider the very first words of the novel:

We have been lost to each other for so long.
My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust. (Diamant 1)

It is with this description of absolute loss that Diamant opens *The Red Tent*. Should we consider the speaker of these lines, this seems wholly appropriate as the words with which to start a discussion of the ways in which women have been marginalised by the biblical tradition – their stories lost, perspectives silenced and interests ignored. I say this because the narrative voice here belongs to Dinah, that biblical daughter who, as Caryn Riswold puts it, is mentioned only “in passing in the book of Genesis” and is more often than not forgotten in the overwhelming presence of her infamous father and twelve brothers- namely Jacob, son of Abraham, and his sons, the brothers of Joseph (142). It is for this reason that these first two lines of her narrative, with their claims regarding her lost significance, are so important.

On the surface, this opening statement is simple, and yet the allegation it contains is a powerful one. Making use of three similarly disconcerting images, namely the loss of connection, the lack of

meaning and ultimately the death of memory in the guise of dust (that to which we return when we die), the statement highlights Dinah's complete historical marginalisation. Even more noteworthy than the images themselves, however, is the fact that they appear to have an implication in the life of the reader since that which is lost or forgotten – resulting in lack of meaning and metaphorical death – seems to be the relationship or connection between the speaker and the readership she is addressing. This is implied by the collective “we”, the suggested intimacy of “to each other” and the accusation that “[the speaker's] name means nothing to [us]”, the readers. Another dimension is added to this claim when we learn that Dinah is not only speaking to us from the grave and across time and space but also that her intended audience consists of modern women whom she addresses as “women with hands and feet as soft as a queen's, with more cooking pots than [they] need, so safe in childbed and so free with [their] tongues” (Diamant 4). What the passage therefore appears to suggest is that modern generations of women have fallen victim to a very specific loss – namely the loss of connection to, knowledge about, and memory of Dinah – one of the women that came before them. Should we, however, consider the novel's later claims regarding not only Dinah's “lost” story but also the lost stories of her mothers and grandmothers, then this loss develops to encompass marginalised biblical women as a collective (Diamant 4). Consequently, we can rephrase the above statement and say that modern readers are faced not only with the loss of connection to, knowledge about, and memory of Dinah, but of all those marginalised biblical women that we might call our imagined ‘foremothers’.

It is, however, only in the next few lines of the prologue that Dinah points out the cause of such a loss:

This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men... That is why I became a footnote...

(Diamant 1)

As we can see above, Dinah blames the loss of a connection between women present and past on what seems to be two simultaneous and interconnected events – namely the way in which “the chain connecting mother to daughter was broken” and the manner in which “the word passed to the keeping of men”. In paying closer attention to these two occurrences, it can be argued that what we have here is in fact a direct reference to biblical history (or collective history for that matter) and the way it has sidelined women's stories as it effectively became the property of men.

The most obvious allusion to history is the reference to “the word” and the “keeping” thereof. I say this because what we perceive to be history was originally an oral storytelling tradition before it was written down and was therefore literally the repeated or “[kept]” “words” and stories of people. This is not only true of prehistory and antiquity in general, but also of biblical history, as various sources agree that large chunks of the Bible would have been orally transmitted for anything from decades to millennia, before “memory” found its way “into manuscript” (Silver 14). It is the reference to “the word” having “passed to the keeping of men”, however, which adds further dimensions to the argument.

The significance of this claim lies in the fact that it is “*men*” who are indicated as having obtained possession over the “word” [emphasis added]. This not only links back the idea that the Bible, as a cultural-historical artefact, is an androcentric text, “written mostly if not entirely by men”, “edited by men” and promoting male interests, but it can also be read as a reference to how history as a whole has become a male-centred enterprise, both controlled by men and written mainly about men (Exum 10). I think Davies summarises this tendency most effectively when he states that “history” whether biblical or otherwise, “has become quite literally ‘his story’ ” (61).

And yet, this was not always so, for the fact that the novel describes “the word” as having “*passed to... men*”, suggests that it was previously in the possession of another party [emphasis added]. If we consider this in concurrence with the other phenomenon that the novel places side by side with this event, namely the “[breaking]” of a “connect[ion]” between “mother [and] daughter”, then we might argue that this passage is alluding to a kind of matrilineal society in which women were the pre-patriarchal “keep[ers] of the word”, passing it on between generations of women. It might even be indicative of a more egalitarian society in which record-keeping was a shared enterprise and not exclusively the domain of men. Whatever the case may be, I think what is significant is that the passage suggests a shift in power during which the authority of storytelling and record-keeping, and so also the power to establish truth and validity, is taken from women and passed exclusively to men.

In a later part of the story, in which Dinah observes that contemporary women are “hungry for the story that was *lost*” and that they “crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed [her], and [her] mothers, and [her] grandmothers”, we can begin to associate this shift of power with the loss of women’s stories (Diamant 4). What the text appears to be suggesting is that men’s exclusive

control over the chronicles of history has resulted in the under-representation or blatant omission of women's stories – a maternal heritage and matrilineal “chain” of recollection that has therefore been lost or “broken”. Interestingly, the feminist critic Cheryl Exum describes exactly such a tendency when she explains that “women's stories are fragmented” “distorted” and “oppressed” for the sake of that greater biblical narrative, that “larger story” which predominantly consists of the “stories of men” and which “biblical scholarship” and orthodox systems of belief, “ha[ve] traditionally taken to be *the* story” (9-10). Clearly, by means of Dinah's prologue, *The Red Tent* is echoing feminist critique and drawing our attention to the androcentric nature of biblical history, the manner it has excluded and ignored the female story and the consequent loss of what is effectively “her story” at the expense of maintaining “his story” (Schottroff, Schroer and Wacker 12).

With regards to such a lost ‘her story’, I think it is also useful to comment on the claim (in the quotation, above) that it was “silence that swallowed” our imagined foremothers and their stories. What such a statement is obviously referring to is the overwhelming silencing or marginalising of a female voice or perspective for which many feminist scholars criticize the biblical tales. We see, for instance, that Ostriker mentions an institutionalised “silencing of women”, while Exum explains that “within this larger [male] story” women are effectively also “denied” an independent voice (*Feminist Revision* 13; 9). Davies refers similarly to the “muted” biblical women and claims that they are “seldom given the opportunity to speak for themselves” (61). What is obviously implied is that even though women might be present in biblical stories, they often function merely as mouthpieces for male interests and are as a result bereft of the ability to speak for themselves – to tell their own stories in their own interests. The result of such silencing is of course that when reading the biblical text, we have very little information regarding *women's* experiences, thoughts and beliefs – they remain underdeveloped footnotes in stories concerned with the experiences of men. It is therefore very fitting that Dinah refers to her mothers as being “swallowed” by “silence” while, a few pages earlier, she also refers to herself as being merely a “voiceless cipher in the text”, emphasizing her own loss of voice and agency in the biblical narrative that co-opts her tale for the sake of men (1).

As *The Red Tent* continues to show us, the silencing of women and the loss of their stories is but one aspect of their historical marginalisation. Women also lose the ability to act in their own interest and therefore forfeit their independence as the characters when the biblical narrative

effectively annexes their tales for its own androcentric purpose. Diamant explicitly refers to this tendency in the following passage, where Dinah elaborates on the effects of history having “passed to men”:

... That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of my brother, Joseph. On those rare occasions that I was remembered, it was as a victim... [n]o one recalled my skill as a midwife, or the songs I sang, or the bread I baked for my insatiable brothers. Nothing remained except a few mangled details about those weeks in Shechem. (Diamant 1)

Once again, what is stressed here is the loss of ‘her story’, Dinah’s story. It is, however, the reference to the process whereby this story became merely a “footnote”, a “brief detour” in the stories of her father and brother, which very effectively captures the feminist critique of women’s secondary status in the biblical text. For, as Exum notes, “in the narratives of the Bible, women are usually minor characters in the stories of men... [and] the stories of women...are [merely] parts of the more cohesive stories of their fathers, husbands, and sons” (9). She further notes that it is within these stories that women become “the creations of androcentric... narrators” and that they “serve androcentric interests” (11).³

Should we consequently consider the novel’s claim and compare it to the figure of Dinah as she appears in the original biblical narrative, it becomes apparent that she is a prime example of what Cheryl Exum describes in the above quote. For in the Bible, although the section in which her story appears, Genesis 34, is usually titled something along the lines of “The Rape of Dinah” or “The Dinah Incident”, *Dinah* “never speaks and [she] acts only once” – in the very first verse as we see her “[going] out to see the daughters of the land” (Polaski 2; *The Woman’s Study Bible*, Gen. 34.1). It is this, her sole action, that results in what has often been read as an illegitimate love-affair with the Prince of Sechem – “misconstrued” as rape by her brothers⁴ – and that allows the sons of Jacob to take action and further their father’s story by avenging their sister and destroying a whole city –

³ Obviously in this sense, the term ‘his story’ takes on a new dimension since it no longer simply refers to stories about men, but now also stories that are in the interest of men.

⁴ For an interesting perspective on the biblical perception of rape, see “The Dinah Affair” in Tikva Frymer-Kensky’s *Reading Women of the Bible*.

violently wiping out the male population and selling the women and children into slavery (Riswold 142).⁵

After Dinah “goes out” we hear nothing more of her; she has no voice. Even though the Bible informs us that the prince’s “soul was strongly attached to Dinah”, that he “loved her”, “spoke kindly to her” and wanted to take her as his “wife”, Tikva Frymer-Kensky points out that “we [do] not know how Dinah feels” (Gen. 34. 3-4; *Reading Women* 182). Even after mass-murder takes place in her name, we are given no account of Dinah or her responses. After her provoking and independent first action, Dinah “disappears from the narrative” and Jacob’s daughter is not mentioned again (Frymer- Kensky, *Reading Women* 181). It is as if she never existed. In fact, in spite of what the title of Genesis 34 suggests, the “story is not really about Dinah”, and “her feelings are not really [of] concern”; rather, as Frymer-Kensky suggests in her reading of the story, the tale is about protecting the interests of men, about father-right and patriarchal control, and it is meant to both warn daughters against independent action and “teach ...others that they cannot violate Israel’s boundaries” (*Reading Women* 194-195).

Thus in the biblical text, Dinah is a prime example of one of the many women who do not appear “as characters in their own right”, who exist merely to serve androcentric interests and who disappear as soon they have fulfilled “their function *vis-à-vis* the male hero” of the tale (Davies 61, 63).⁶ In fact, this is exactly what *The Red Tent* seems to be critiquing when Diamant makes Dinah observe that her *own* story was forgotten and that “no one recalled” her many skills or the songs she sang; in historical memory “nothing remained of her” except those few “mangled details” important enough to further the story of her father and brothers (Diamant 2). In this sense, I think Dinah is also commenting on the fact that ‘her story’, her concerns and her contributions, have been effectively suppressed, distorted and marginalised for the sake of ‘his story’ and Diamant in turn

⁵ For further reference see Genesis 34: 24-29.

⁶ Some of the most popular examples of the way in which women are “killed off” in the biblical narratives once they have served androcentric interests are the matriarchs of Genesis (Davies 63). Their “allotted purpose” is primarily to produce an heir, “[ensure] the continuation of the male line” and consequently also the exclusively male covenant with God (Davies 62). As critics point out, after achieving the said purpose, these matriarchs either die, “recede imperceptibly to the background” or simply disappear from the text – as is the case with Dinah (Davies 62). Interestingly, these marginalised matriarchs are the very same mothers and grandmother to whom Dinah refers when she speaks about lost stories.

shows us how biblical women in their capacity as the mere adjuncts to the tales of male protagonists fulfil only secondary and subordinate roles.

Some might object to such a statement, citing women like Ester, Ruth and Deborah as examples of women who have shaped biblical history through their words and deeds. However, such an observation is merely reverting back to the same argument that has been used for decades to cover up and smooth over the obviously secondary status of biblical women. This same, often-quoted, but few nominally inspirational roles of women are told and retold in an attempt to drown out the overwhelming silence, marginalisation and insignificance of other biblical women (Fiorenza, *But She Said* 27). And yet, we cannot base our theories on the handful of women that prove exceptions to the rule that is women's marginalization. As scholars like Davies warn, these "few token female leaders...prophetesses" and chosen ones "are merely exceptions that *prove* the rule" for in truth "in the dramatic stories which captured the imagination of the biblical authors the protagonists are almost invariably male" while women are for the most part, when they do not act as helpmeets, facilitators or 'others', "conspicuous only by their absence" (61).

We can therefore argue that *The Red Tent* – through its use of Dinah as exemplar – creates in readers an awareness of the fact that women have been marginalised, subordinated and often simply ignored by a biblical narrative that is overwhelmingly androcentric in nature. As Dinah starts her tale with the many references to lost stories, voicelessness, silences and specifically the manner in which her own story has been co-opted by history, readers cannot help but realise that biblical history, for all practical purposes, is in fact 'his story' and that with regards to 'her story' modern women either face a gaping, empty hole or the biased constructions of men eager to further their own interests. Having made such an observation, I should point out that the Bible as a cultural-historical artefact is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, as I suggest above, it leaves us without women's stories and in this sense has rendered women invisible – their "voice[s] ... muted, [their] contributions neglected and [their] concerns ignored" (Davies 61). Secondly, when the Bible has given us what I hesitate to call 'women's stories' as part of the overwhelming androcentric narrative that is the story of God and the men he chooses to serve him, these stories have 'written' women them into a very specific role – that of the helpmeet and facilitator, the secondary and the insignificant 'other'.

Thus, with a few extraordinary exceptions, the Bible's overall literary representation of women creates the impression that they are either marginal or insignificant and that their stories, concerns and perspectives are not really valid in the overall scheme of things. As we move into the next section and consider the Bible as prescriptive text, I think we will begin to see how such a portrayal is highly problematic for feminists who, "in their struggle with contemporary discrimination" need to also wrestle with these ancient yet persistent images of women (Wright 120).

"That's Going To Be Hard To Escape": Prescriptive Texts and the Proper Place of Women

With regard to the above feminist critique of the Bible, it might be useful to point out that scholars like Tikva Frymer-Kensky argue that biblical literature, despite its tendencies to marginalise women and portray them as secondary and insignificant others, is essentially without misogynistic intent. In an attempt to support such a point of view, she argues that the Bible "unlike other ancient literature . . . does not represent any ideas about the woman as 'Other'" and "does not 'explain' or justify [women's] subordination by portraying [them] as different or inferior" (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading Women* xv). Instead, she suggests, it merely "reflects" the beliefs and practices of the time – in other words, a "social order" which was already "well-entrenched fifteen hundred years before Israel came into being" and "in which women are systematically disadvantaged and subordinated" (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading Women* xiii- xiv).

This may very well be the case. However, as became clear at the beginning of this chapter, the real problem with the Bible and the way it reflects women is exactly that it has *not* been recognised and read as a biased cultural-historical artefact that merely reflects the patriarchal social practices of its time. Instead it has been read as divinely inspired "scripture", or in other words, "as the speech of God, holy, true [and] inerrant" (Silver 3). Having been understood as prescribing God's will, biblical stories have "inspired, directly or indirectly," many of the patriarchal values of Western culture, and while the feminist movement of the last two centuries has made significant advances with regard to the social and political equality of women, the truth of the matter is that many people often still "advocate narrow and restrictive roles" for women based on biblical texts that portray them as inferior (Davies 9-10; Japinga 40). I think Davies captures this dilemma quite well in the following passage:

If the Bible had been read like any other book, its teaching concerning women would have carried little authoritative weight. But the fact is that the Bible has not been read like any other book; rather it has been

regarded over the centuries as the repository of divine truth, and its guidance has been sought and accepted by vast numbers of people throughout the world. Consequently, its teaching concerning the role and status of women has been accepted without question as part of the divinely established order. (Davies 10)

Such an observation then brings me to the next aspect of our discussion, namely the way in which the Bible has, as Pazeraite puts it, “been interpreted down the ages to justify the subordination of women to men” (92). I would like to suggest that one needs to consider two different aspects of the Bible as a prescriptive text. The first is how its andocentric stories have “through their use as exempla ...shaped our perceptions” of gender, and the second is how it has literally elevated utterances regarding the “proper role and place of women” to be reiterated, repeated and proclaimed as the will of God (Fuchs 7).

At the end of the previous section on Dinah, I hinted at the significance of the lasting impressions that are created when women are absent or play secondary roles in biblical stories. However, if one is to seriously consider how such stories have shaped our perception of women as secondary and subordinate, there can be no better place to start than with what is probably one the most famous tales in the Bible, namely the story of the creation and the fall of man found in Genesis 1- 3. This is of particular interest to us because as the archetypal tale of origin and original sin, it has been widely recognized as one of the texts “which have historically had the most power to portray women negatively or to restrict their roles” (Japinga 46).

The most important aspect of this narrative and the one that has had the most profound effect on what is perceived to be women’s God-given place in the world, is undoubtedly the story of her creation (Japinga 75). It is on this story that Elsie Aidinoff’s bases her novel, *The Garden*- slightly altering the dynamics of famous tale and telling it from the perspective of Eve, an intelligent and independent young woman who is raised and educated by the wise and benevolent Serpent. It is for this that reason I would like to open our discussion of the Genesis account of creation by considering the following passage from the novel:

“Where did [Adam and I] come from?” [Asked Eve.]

“Well, there are two stories about that [Said the Serpent, her mentor]. You remember the words: ‘God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female created he them.’ Not very well put, but the meaning is clear.”

“And the other story?”

“The other story says God made you from Adam’s rib.” (Aidinoff 35)

What Aidinoff is highlighting for the reader when she has the Serpent mention “two stories” of creation, are the discrepancies between what modern scholars classify as the first and second creation accounts. The first creation account that is directly quoted by the Serpent, as it is found in Genesis 1:27, presents readers with a potentially straightforward and liberal view of the beginning. Arguing that the “man” created in God’s image refers to mankind in general and not a male person in particular, it is suggested that the verse indicates a simultaneous creation of male and female, both of whom are made in “the image of God”, as the last clause of the verse indicates. Consequently, such a creation account has been read as offering an egalitarian vision of the first man and woman – created simultaneously and as equals - and is as such unproblematic for women eager to define themselves as equal.⁷ Accordingly, we may note that the intelligent and quite feminist Eve whom Aidinoff recreates in her novel, has no problem with such a version of the beginning and simply accepts it as legitimate when she first hears the tale.

Contrary to such a vision of the beginning, however, we find the more popular and better-known second creation account mentioned by the Serpent. This is the account that Aidinoff’s Eve tries to disprove and struggles with throughout the text. This account is the one we find in Genesis 2. It tells the tale of Adam’s initial creation from dust, his eventual loneliness and God’s delayed decision to create for him a helpmate from his rib. Let us consider the story as found in

The Women’s Study Bible:

⁷And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being ... ¹⁵ Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it... ¹⁸ And the Lord God said, “ It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him” ... ²¹ And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall over Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. ²²Then the rib which the Lord had taken from man He made into woman, and he brought her to man. ²³And Adam said:

“This is the bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman

⁷ The first creation account has also, in some instances, been read as indicating the creation of an initially androgynous being who is later split into male and female counterparts. For more information on this subject one can refer to Japinga (75) or for a similar, but truly revisionist reading of the original Hebrew account of creation, see Berkowitz (151).

Because she was taken out of Man.” (Gen. 2. 7-23)

This second creation account therefore sketches woman (Eve) as being created second, as being created not from the same original material as man and finally as being created ‘for’ man, to be his “helper”. It is such a portrayal of woman as a secondary and ‘delayed’ creation, made to serve as man’s helpmeet, which has “profoundly effected the Christian understanding of male and female” and has led to some truly disturbing arguments regarding women’s secondary place in society (Japinga 75). Patriarchal and Calvinistic thinking, for example, has seen the way in which Eve is created after Adam – as his helper – as a sign of “the true order of nature [as] prescribed by God” and has consequently argued that the God-given and preordained role of “the whole female sex” is to be “subject to man” (Calvin, qtd. in Hutchins 672). Similarly, the fact that Eve is created from the secondary material of Adam’s rib and not the original dust of the earth has also led to arguments that women are inherently deficient and inferior beings who are “only indirectly in God’s image” (Japinga 75).⁸ These are just two of the many arguments for women’s inferiority that draw on Genesis 2 for justification and in so doing serve to highlight how very problematic the text is when it is read as prescribing God-given gender-roles.

The portrayal of Eve as a secondary and lesser creation is however only the first aspect of the Genesis story which has been drawn on to justify women’s subordination to men. The tale of her original sin in Genesis 3 has likewise, through its use as an example of women’s inherently weak and corrupt nature, functioned to render them negatively. According to the biblical tale, it is Eve who is approached by the Serpent (popularly read as Satan incarnate), who falls for his promise of godliness and who then “[takes] of [the] fruit and [eats]”, dragging Adam down with her by handing him a bite of what she knows to be forbidden food (Gen. 3. 6). Whether her actions are driven by moral weakness, childlike naïvety or criminal defiance, they earn her a prime spot in what Judith McKinlay describes as “theological writers and redactors[’] ...grand meta-narrative of disobedience” and mark her – the female prototype – as innately sinful and weak-willed (31). Because it is she who both succumbs to the cunning serpent’s deception and knowingly breaks

⁸ In this regard we may refer to the church father Augustine “whose opinions have... had a significant impact on theology and practice in the Christian tradition” and who Japinga quotes as suggesting that women can only be in “the image of God” when they are considered “together with [their] own husband[s]” who- as men- are always “fully and completely” in the “image of God” (12, 5). He carries on to argue that when women are considered “separately” from their husbands and in “[their] quality of helpmate”, then they are “not in the image of God” (Japinga 75).

God's ban on the forbidden fruit, the first woman is therefore blamed for humanity's "sinful and fallen nature" and, as we will see, this strongly influences the social and religious status of her female 'descendants': as the 4th Century churchfather, St. John Chrysostom so famously stated, through Eve's original sin, "the whole female race transgressed" (Hutchins 672; Walker 290).

Because this biblical text portrays Eve, the first woman, and not Adam, the first man, as the one who is approached, deceived and ultimately 'sins', theologians have in the past endowed all women with the same 'obvious' character flaws that make of Eve the original fallen woman.⁹ In her capacity as the "mother of all lies and the root of all evil", Eve is therefore seen to justify all women's need for spiritual guidance and moral leadership – a theory that conveniently underpins patriarchal arguments regarding the need for women's submission to men. If one takes into account such reasoning, together with the discussions regarding Eve's secondary creation (cited above), one can begin to see how stories like the one in Genesis 2-3, when read prescriptively, have provided the basis for gender stereotypes which see women as intrinsically lesser than and inferior to men.

Apart from providing the examples that justify women's secondary and subordinate status in a patriarchal society that reads the Bible as a "repository of divine truth", the tale of Eve as the second in creation and the first to sin is also highly problematic for another reason (Davies 10). In this tale we also find one of the proclamations (made here by God himself and not simply one of his 'messengers') that have been most powerful in justifying patriarchal practice and prescribing for women a subordinate social role. I am of course referring here to the highly problematic curse found in Genesis 3:16 in which God, in response to Eve's 'original sin', tells the woman that her husband shall rule over her. Aidinoff paraphrases this very incident near the end of *The Garden* when she has God – "eyes red with rage" – make the following proclamation while "wav[ing] his fist in [Eve's] face": "I will greatly multiply your sorrow. In pain and suffering you shall bring forth children, and your husband shall rule over you" (Aidinoff 389).

The reason I have chosen to quote Aidinoff and not the Bible in this instance is because in the very next line, the Serpent, who acts as a kind of social conscience in the novel, responds to God's proclamation by dryly and sadly commenting that "[t]hat's going to be hard to escape" (389). I

⁹ Consider the following point by Hutchins: "women of the eighteenth century were considered by men to be weak and intellectually inferior. These allegations were 'based in Scriptural evidence' and Eve's perceived flaws were the keystone for every argument for women's inferiority" (675).

would like to suggest that with this seemingly trivial statement, Aidinoff is making a very powerful piece of social commentary that captures the very essence of my argument- namely that thousands of years after it was supposedly spoken, these words would still be read as prescribing patriarchal practice as the social order ordained by God – proving this to be an pronouncement that women have been unable to escape.

This statement is of course just one of many biblical statements that seem to inform us of women's proper place and role as ordained by God and those who claim to know his will. However, in order to really show how such "domination-legitimizing" utterances have been accepted as reflecting God's will, it might be useful to give a tangible example of the way this text continues to have negative implications for the lives of women who subscribe to the Christian faith (Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word* 52). In order to do so I will draw from Sue Monk Kidd's memoir, *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, in which she recounts one of the painful memories of the way in which the Bible has been used to validate women's social subordination to men. In this instance she recounts a childhood memory where in one of those ever-popular and "heated boys-are-better-than-girls or girls-are-better-than-boys arguments that eight years olds have", the Bible scores a final blow for the boys:

Finally one of the boys told us to shut up, and of course, we wanted to know who'd made him our boss. "God!" he said. "God made us the boss." So we girls marched inside to the teacher and asked her point blank if this was so...

"Well... actually... [she said]...technically, I guess I have to say the Bible does make men the head".

"The head?" we asked.

"That means in charge," she said and looked at us as if to say, "I know, I know, it's a blow, but that's the way it is". (16-17)

It is the teacher's last comment regarding "the way it is" which provides a tangible example of the way in which prescriptive biblical statements regarding women, what they are and should be, have influenced and still continue to influence our perceptions of the their role and status in modern society.

This discussion gives one a sense of the way in which the Bible – through both its sexist utterances and its portrayal of women as secondary and insignificant others – has legitimised the patriarchal

paradigms responsible for women's social degradation. As Davies suggests, there can be little doubt as to the major role that the Bible has played in "shaping peoples' perceptions and reinforcing sexist attitudes and strictures" (10). Such a statement then brings me to the next aspect of our discussion, for, as Davies continues to argue, "nowhere have the effects" of the Bible "been more in evidence than in the institutions of the church" (Davies 10).

"It Is For Men To Come After [Christ]": A Sacred Text that Sanctifies Only Men

What we have considered up until now is what I would like to call the more 'secular' or practical implications of the manner in which the Bible marginalises, silences and subjugates women, portraying them as secondary characters whose proper role and place is to be subject to men. However, since the Bible is popularly recognised as a religious or sacred text and as such shapes our perception of not only divinity but also of what is considered to be sacred, and of who has access to that sacred, our discussion remains incomplete without some consideration of the spiritual implications of this misogynistic trend. Thus, in what follows we shall shift our focus to consider the Bible as a phallogocentric religious text and as such consider the implications of women's exclusion and marginalisation from ecclesiastical participation and religious leadership.

In light of the above discussion of the Bible as prescriptive text, the most obvious place to start our discussion of women's religious marginalisation would be to consider how certain biblical pronouncements have been used to deny their entry to what we might term 'the priesthood'. It is because of its approach to this and other aspects of women's exclusion from the religious centre that I found Michelle Roberts' novel *The Wild Girl* a thought-provoking read. Presented as the lost fifth Gospel written by Mary Magdalene, apostle and companion to the saviour,¹⁰ the novel sets up a rivalry between her and the openly patriarchal Saint Peter. Conveniently, the novel therefore relies

¹⁰ With regard to the portrayal of Mary as Christ's companion and apostle, Roberts is drawing on writings from the Gnostic and Apocryphal traditions – texts that were dismissed by the early church as heretical and excluded from the canon, but which nonetheless, "reflect a surviving historical tradition from Christ's life... [and] ministry" (Hastings 38). Such texts suggest that Mary was of much greater significance in Christ's life and ministry than the Bible allows. Hastings for instance highlights that the Gnostic Gospels not only portray Mary as a "first apostle", a kind of "heroine" who takes a leading role in the first Christian community and one who "is privileged to receive visions, has greater comprehension than Peter and acts as a conduit for the Lord's teachings", but also as his favoured companion and partner (57, 40). In light of such an observation, we may note that *The Gospel of Mary*, for instance, describes her as the one whom "the saviour made worthy" and whom "he loved...more than" the rest (*The Gnostic Bible* 481). Similarly, in *The Gospel of Philip*, she is described as one of three women who "always walked with the Lord", namely "Mary his mother and her sister and Magdalene" who is then, unlike in the scriptures, defined as "the one who was called his companion" or as other translations suggest, his "consort" (*The Gnostic Bible* 481, 26; Haskins 407).

on the antagonistic Peter – who so fittingly actually becomes “the leader of [Christ’s] flock” and the founder of the patriarchal church – to mimic the authoritative voice of religious institutions that have been quite rigorous in their quest to limit women’s access to religious office and authority (Roberts 13). Time and again we see him remind the women apostles in general and the unconventional Mary in particular, of their proper place:

Tell Mary to leave us, he cried: for she is not worthy of life.

All the women [disciples] in our group sat bolt upright and stared at him. Nobody spoke. It was out now, what many of us had secretly feared and waited for: that old denunciation we had lived with all our lives so far and which had constrained us so bitterly until we met Jesus. You are unclean. You may not be priests. (Roberts 59)

And do women now stand up and speak? Simon Peter jeered at me [Mary]: shall a woman raise her voice in public and instruct men? (Roberts 60)

Our law tells us that women must learn from men and may not preach in public as Mary and her sisters do. Don’t you know? That women are the gateway to evil and death? (Roberts 62)

All three pronouncements by Peter are meant to limit Mary’s role as apostle and priest and are of course allusions to the biblical texts that have historically had the most power to limit women’s entry to the priesthood. The first is a reference to the Levitical law that marks women as unclean and limits priesthood to men, while the second and third paraphrase Paul’s instruction in Corinthians that “women be silent in church and refrain from teaching or exercising authority over men” (Japinga 46).¹¹

I do not think it is a coincidence that Roberts uses Peter, the founder of the Church, to utter these specific phrases. I would like to argue that she is making a clear criticism of the very real effects of such texts. As Davies informs us, even in contemporary society verses such as the ones Roberts alludes to, “continue to be cited in arguments to prevent women from being ordained and to exclude them from positions of leadership and authority in the church” (10). For proof of such blatant sexism within contemporary religious institutions, we need not look much further than South

¹¹ In this sense, Peter’s last statement regarding women as “the gateway to evil and death” could of course be argued to be a reference to Eve. As we mentioned in the previous section, women were for a long time denied religious authority because, as the descendants of Eve, they had misled man once – a “evil” act that had led to the fall or the metaphorical “death” of mankind.

Africa's own Christian community where, only this past year (2009), a commission of the Reformed Churches of South Africa cited the Bible as source and justification for their "synodical-decision" that women could not and should not be ordained (Retief 18).

Once again Roberts uses *The Wild Girl* to critique such phallogocentric religious logic when – after the death of Christ – she has Mary observe how only male disciples would fulfil the role of priests under Peter's leadership. In contrast, the female disciples who had spent an equal amount of time with Christ would only be allowed to "preach and prophesy...within carefully established limits" and would mostly have to learn to "to serve the church in many and important [other] ways" – namely the ways "in which women served their husbands and families" (Roberts 134). It is this emphasis on the restricted, supportive and service-orientated roles that women would in future be limited to that I found particularly interesting for the way it conformed to what Kidd defines as women's role in the modern church:

Women have reigned in the nurseries and the social halls but have been mostly absent from pulpits and places where theology, policy, and spiritual meaning are forged. Within the church, women have been more apt to polish brass, arrange flowers, put cookies on a plate, clean up, keep the nursery, be led, pass the credit, look pretty, and be supportive. In other words, women have frequently functioned more like church handmaids than religious meaning makers and symbol creators (50)

Given the above discussion, I think we can begin to see how the Bible's ancient, outdated and, quite frankly, sexist utterances have robbed women of "official recognition...power and status in [the] visible hierarchies... of religious institutions" both past and present (King 38). However, this is by no measure the only way the Bible has justified women's religious marginalization and exclusion. It has also spiritually "dispossessed" women in much less obvious ways (King 42). In order to discuss this, we need to turn our attention to one of the aspects of the Bible – and by extension the Christian faith based on it – that has received most attention from feminist critics over the past couple of years, namely its representation of the godhead in exclusively masculine terms.

With regards to the portrayal of divinity, critics point out that the Bible has completely repressed and degraded images of a feminine or female divine and as a result has left readers with a "core symbolism" that is "one-sidedly male" (Catharina Halkes, qtd. in Oddie 16). One need think no further than the new Testament example of Christ, the *Son* of God, teaching the disciples to pray to God as "Our Holy *Father* who art in Heaven" for a valid example of such an androcentric, and for

that matter patriarchal, perception of divinity (Luke 11.2). The reason such exclusively masculine imagery is problematic is because, as Slee points out, “the gap between symbol and reality is closed”: by constantly referring to God as male, “the majority of believers” despite convictions that “God is a spirit and beyond gender”, find it difficult to perceive of God as anything but male.¹² Thus, the “patriarchal God-language” employed in the Bible and consequently also in theology and the church, language which almost exclusively describes God in the masculine forms ‘He’, ‘Him’, ‘God’, ‘Master’, ‘Father’ and so on, facilitates the predominant, if not consciously recognised, perception that God really *is* male (Slee 26-27). I think William Oddie gives us very good example of this process when he quotes the Credo television production titled *God the Mother*; this documents that when children are “asked to illustrate their idea of God” in “religious education class ... both boys and girls *all* depict God as a man” (4).

Once again, Roberts problematises this particular aspect of Christian theology in *The Wild Girl*. As such the novel constantly reminds readers of the absence of what it terms the “the female part” of God and thoroughly critiques, both implicitly and explicitly, the idea of a Father God conceived of in only masculine terms (Roberts 175). Consider for instance the following claim that Mary imagines the women of the world making at some time in the indefinite future:

You [men] have created God in your image alone, and you have spoken in the name of God to name [women] Babylon, the harlot city who must be trampled and overthrown. (Roberts 171)

Over and beyond highlighting how an exclusively masculine God has justified perceptions of woman as the unholy other, “Babylon” – something I will pay more attention to in Chapter Four - this passage also showcases how this perception of God has endowed men with a particular and elite kind of authority. As Roberts puts it above, this is an authority that allows men to “[speak] in the name” of a God that is made in “[their] image alone”. What she is highlighting is what we might describe as one of the patriarchal church’s most “exclusive and oppressive interpretations” of the exclusively masculine image of God – namely, the phallogocentric theology that places men, being

¹² Thus we find that despite their insistence that God is not male, Christians who are completely at home with perceptions of God the Father, find it difficult to conceive of God the Mother and become completely distressed by any attempt to replace the masculine term “God”, with its feminine counterpart, “Goddess”. The moment one conceives of God as feminine, in other words, as God/ess, one is no longer within the boundaries of Christianity.

'like' God, in positions of godlike authority while relegating women to the space of powerlessness (King 51).

In order to further discuss such a theology and the manner in which it limits women, we can turn to another passage in which the novel again makes use of the apostle Peter to mimic such thinking:

Mary, he said: listen. First of all we knew Jesus as Man. Now since his resurrection, we know him as God. The fact that God became Man, and that the word took flesh as Man, means that it is for men to come after him and baptise others and offer bread and wine. It is as simple as that. (Roberts 131)

When Peter observes that it is because "God became Man" that "it is for men" to exercise spiritual authority, he is giving voice to the same phallogocentric logic outlined above. According to this logic – which has long been used to limit spiritual and by implication social leadership to men – only men are truly 'like' the masculine God who chooses to manifest himself in male form; therefore, as his representatives on earth, they are in a position of unique authority. Both quotes play on the idea that Simone de Beauvoir criticises when she observes that biblical monotheism gave men "a God like themselves – a God ...which legitimise[s] and seal[s] their power (qtd. in Kidd 50). Clearly then, what Roberts is highlighting – and perhaps even mocking when she has the self-righteous Peter observe that "it is as simple as that" – is how images of a male God have automatically placed men- his male replicas- at the top of the spiritual hierarchy and in so doing legitimised patriarchal power-structures within religion and outside it. As Mary Daly so famously put it, "If God is male, then male is God" (qtd. in Slee 27).

Such a one-sided perception of God does, not, however, simply legitimatise men's spiritual authority; it also denies women that same authority. After all, the same logic that makes men like God, makes women unlike 'Him'. What is inherent to the above passages, albeit less obviously, is how the image of a masculine God that endorses men's positions at the centre of the sacred simultaneously facilitates women's expulsion to its periphery. This is, of course, exactly what Peter does to women when he limits the right to "come after [Christ] and baptise others and offer bread and wine" to the men who "reflect" God: he excludes them from what Haskins so aptly defines as the "unique right and sacred power to teach, rule and sanctify" and in so doing he marginalises them from the very centre of religious practice and authority (55).

It is thus hardly surprising that Peter's explanation to Mary (above) is his way of justifying why she "may not be a priest" and participate in the practices Christ bid them perform (Roberts 131). What he is so carefully trying to show Mary is that as a woman, she does not represent what he perceives as a clearly masculine God. Interestingly, Roberts has Mary comment on this very attempt a little later when she observes that Peter's decision that "the Son of the Father [will] be reflected in a male priesthood" has "divided the world neatly into those who fully [reflect] God and those who [do] not" (137). In having Mary make this statement, Roberts is criticising Peter's phallogocentric logic in true feminist fashion and highlighting one of women's biggest problems with the image of a male God, namely that it "exclude[s] them from representing, in themselves, the divine (male)" and in so doing, effectively excludes them from that divinity's inner circle (Lindsay 60).

Clearly the image of a male God with which the Bible presents to us – and which Christian doctrine perpetuates – is one that disempowers and marginalises women, not only because it prevents them from representing the divine or from "carrying God inside [themselves]", as Mary puts it, but also because it in effect robs them of any 'right' to religious authority and meaning-making (Roberts 70). Thus women are not only denigrated to peripheral and unimportant religious positions by prescriptive texts that deny them the ability to teach and that demand their silence and compliance, but also by the theology that stems from imagery of an exclusively masculine divine. The problem with such ongoing religious marginalisation of women is of course that centuries of biblical scholarship, interpretation and teaching have taken place almost exclusively in a male voice and that most theology is hopelessly tainted by the androcentric cultural bias of these (almost exclusively) male theologians. As Paula Fredriksen points out, theology has been "built upon ... the experience of male theologians" and "women's experience [has been] denied, not even recognised in [the] religious cosmos" directed by men acting in the name of a masculine God (qtd. in Oddie 7).

13

Roberts implicitly highlights such a bias when she has Mary make the following comments:

Other among the disciples besides myself, I know, have chosen to write a record and an interpretation of the life of Jesus. The task I have been given is to set down my own experience, to bear witness to the manner in which I

¹³ This is of course not only true of biblical scholarship, but also of the Bible itself. Guérin, for instance, points out that as a text mostly concerned with men and their interactions with a male God, the bible provides us with "very little information concerning the spiritual experiences of women" (31).

received God ... I have been commanded to write down the truth as I, who am not Simon Peter or John or any of the other male disciples, saw it, and I shall do so. Our different truths, collected up and written down in books, are for the use and inspiration of the disciples who come after us. (Roberts 70)

What this passage seems to suggest is that Mary's "truth", her "experience" of God might differ from that of the male disciples. We see her reiterate such thinking later in the novel when, in an attempt to convince Peter of women's worth as preachers and teachers, she observes that "[they] are all different... and each of [them] doubtless has a different experience of revelation" (Roberts 130). Such statements are however, overshadowed by the androcentric historical reality, for as anyone reading *The Wild Girl* will know, Mary's version (or a woman's version) of the truth was silenced and excluded when the only church-sanctified versions of events became the four Gospels, named for the male disciples responsible for them: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

I suggest that through her emphasis on the importance of difference, Roberts is prompting readers to consider what kinds of revelation were lost when men's versions and truths became the only truth. I think Japinga captures such a query exactly when she asks:

How much truth and insight has been lost over two thousand years of Christian history because the theological wisdom of women has not been recognised, appreciated, or recorded... Would theology be different today if the church had recognised women's gifts throughout history? What has the church lost by refusing to hear the voices of women? (Japinga 17).

Thus through our discussion of *The Wild Girl* and the way it highlights and critiques woman's exclusion from the priesthood, as well as the degrading and limiting tendencies of an exclusively male godhead and the loss of women's perspectives and interpretations of the experience of divinity, we can see how the Bible has legitimated a phallogocentric faith tradition. As such this book of books is not only responsible for women's social degradation but also their spiritual marginalisation and religious disempowerment.

"Writing as Revision": Calling for Change

Given the above discussions, what becomes apparent is that, whether through their use as exempla or in their capacity as the revelation of God's will, biblical stories always have functioned, and continue to function, as "rhetorical weapon[s]" that legitimise the social, political and religious "supremacy of men over women" (Fuchs 7; Kirch 249). Once we therefore realise how "deeply

implicated in oppressive ideology” the Bible truly is and how it has functioned as both “symbol and source of [women’s] oppression”, we can begin to see why feminist critics call for the revision and transformation of these seminal texts for both secular and religious reasons (Davies 13).

In line with such an observation, I would like to quote Adrienne Rich, who in a paper subtitled “Writing as Re-Vision” considers the literature of “male-dominated society” and the “assumptions” it makes about women, and then famously observes that

Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women ... an act of survival...[for] we need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (35)

Rich’s emphasis on difference corresponds to Alice Jardine’s call for women to “think difference”: “At this point it seems impossible to think difference...[b]ut think it we must, because if we don’t, it will continue to think us, as it has since Genesis at the very least” (xxvi)

If we consider the above discussion of the Bible in light of these two statements, we might argue that the biblical text has historically ‘thought’ women ‘differently’ from men, has ‘written’ them into an insignificant and disempowered space and has in effect constructed gender stereotypes and social paradigms that lie at the heart of their oppression. As such, we can begin to see the significance of both Rich’s demand that we “know the writings of the past... differently” and Jardine’s call for us to “think difference” – both of which speak to my own concept of ‘stealing the story’. For if we can in effect ‘steal’ the original stories, think difference and use our imaginations to know them differently – only then can we “break [their] hold over us” and stop them “think[ing] us” – as they have done “since Genesis”.

Based on this premise, the following chapters will explore the textual strategies women writers employ in order to think difference, steal the story and transform the old biblical narratives into new feminist fiction. As we will show, it is essentially by transforming what can be regarded as some of the founding stories of patriarchy that women writers are able to engage in the gynocritical attempt to subvert, demystify and revise their original doctrine, offering readers new and liberating discourses, ideologies, myths and theologies in its stead.

Repossessing Ideology: From Biblical ‘His Story’ to Feminist ‘Her Story’

What will happen when women re-imagine culture?
What is the relation of the female writer to the male text, the male story?
How can we deal with that ur-text of patriarchy... from which our
theory and practice of canonicity derives... that book of books we call the Bible?
How shall women rewrite themselves back into the history of ideology?
-Alicia Ostriker¹

she carries a book but it is not
the tome of ancient wisdom,

the pages, I imagine, are the blank pages
of the unwritten volume of the new.
-H.D.²

If there is anything we learned from our discussion in the previous chapter, it is that despite its other functions, the Bible remains a cultural-historical artefact reflective of the ideas of its time. Marginalising, silencing and subjugating women, it portrays them as one-dimensional footnotes and facilitators that are only significant in so far as they serve the interests of men. Through its literary representation of women, this “tome of ancient wisdom” – borrowing H.D.’s phrase above – therefore propagates an androcentric and sexist ideology.

However, like the indefinite female figure in H.D.’s poem who carries not the book of “ancient wisdom”, but rather an as yet “unwritten volume of the new”, we find many women writers who have rejected the original biblical stories and the ideology they propagate and who are instead choosing to rewrite those stories in new and liberatory ways. Tracing this revisionist tendency in this chapter as well as the next two, I am interested in the methods whereby these stories, these

¹ *Feminist Revisions and The Bible*, page 27

² Qtd in *Feminist Revisions and The Bible*, page 56

ideological ‘volumes of the new’, transform patriarchal propaganda into new feminist fiction. However, before I consider how such revisionist feminist fiction gives us new myths and even new theologies (as will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four), I would like to first explore how they might endow us with a new ideology that is liberatory for women, not only because it counters that of original biblical text, but in many ways also that of the conservative Christian discourses based on it.

In view of such an aim, I have divided the following chapter into two sections. The first attempts to identify the textual strategies that writers employ to locate their revisions outside the ideology of the androcentric original, in so doing giving us stories which are gynocentric and feminist in the sense that they are “work[ing] against, not with, conservative ideological discourses” that deny women centrality, autonomy, humanity and power (Cranny-Francis 1). The second section, flowing out of the first, attempts to trace how novels that employ these strategies function as utopian fiction that affords readers the ideological distance needed to view the patriarchal practices and paradigms of their own societies with suspicion.

Section One: The Textual Strategies of Revisionist Fiction

Female Characters as Protagonists: Confronting the Issue of Centrality

As was mentioned in Chapter One, we have come to consider the Bible as ‘his story’ because it talks “almost entirely [about] men” (Murphy 42). From Genesis to Revelations, we encounter the stories of fathers, sons, prophets, kings, and many other *men* of God in their various shapes and sizes. Cullen Murphy very conveniently summarises this tendency for us when she observes that only 111 of the 1426 people who are considered important enough to the Old Testament narrative to merit being named, are women (Murphy 42).³ That means that 1315 of those named are men, an overwhelming 92 percent of the total. With the exception of a handful of women who act in the interest of either their male progeny or the Hebrew nation as a whole, the protagonists of biblical tales are therefore almost always men. It is for this reason that I suggest that the most obvious manner in which women writers can counter the androcentric ideology of the original is by firmly locating their revisions around women, giving them central place as protagonists.

³ In comparison, “the proportion of women in the New Testament is about twice as great, but still leaves them a tiny minority” (Murphy 42).

This is the first textual strategy that I identify in revisionist novels and one which I suggest plays a major role in “challeng[ing]” and “correct[ing]...gender stereotypes” – an act which, according to Alicia Ostriker, lies at the “core” of revision (*Stealing the Language* 217). As I have pointed out, it is the excluded and marginalised position of women in the Bible, as well as the way in which their tales merely serve to further the stories of men, that shapes the gender stereotype that sees women as being of lesser importance than men. Eryl Davies explains this perception when he comments that their literary representation constructs women as “the ‘other’, the marginal [and] the insignificant” (61).

Consequently we can argue that by making these secondary and insignificant ‘others’ into the protagonists of the tales that have previously marginalised them, writers employ gender in a revisionist manner. It is a process that, through the counter- or revisionist textual strategy that Ostriker terms the “device of making the other into the subject”, endows female characters with the significance and importance previously reserved for only male characters (Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 216). As a result, these stories challenge and correct the androcentric ideology that places men centre-stage and become what one might term “role-reversing” prose for the manner in which they revise the stereotype of the lesser-than and insignificant woman (Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 217).

As we pointed out in the Introduction, this type of fiction has become a very popular genre in recent years. There are many writers who are currently transforming previously marginalised women into the central characters of stories that have for centuries ‘belonged’ to men and who in so doing are engaging in this most basic process of making ‘his story’ hers. However, this particular textual strategy has its limitations. I say this because, although many of these novels are revisionist in the sense that they prioritise their female characters, they can be located on what I would regard as the conservative pole of a revisionist axis. Easily classified as a type of evangelical fiction, these novels take as their protagonists biblical women, but when imagining the lives and stories of these women, they stay true to the patriarchal agenda of the original biblical accounts.

Whether or not this is the intention, I suggest that such novels are indeed engaging in social commentary or biblical critique merely by the fact of their existence. By offering stories about biblical women, they are in effect acknowledging that these stories are absent from the original biblical narrative, and in some conservative way they address that absence. However, this is,

arguably, where their acts of revision end: although they may invent the odd character or scenario, with regard to characterisation, setting and narrative point of view they conform to the androcentric ideology of the original, keeping the tales and the women at their centre neatly within the patriarchal mould of the biblical text.

The example of the novel titled *Unafraid*, by the South African writer Francine Rivers, will help to demonstrate this point. As the last novel in her *Linage of Grace* series about “the women in the lineage of Jesus Christ”, *Unafraid* transforms the story of Jesus’ immaculate conception, ministry and death, as found in the Gospels, into the story of Mary, Mother of Jesus (Rivers 9). On the back of the novel, we find the following inscription:

... Francine Rivers tells these stories in a way you’ve never heard before. Remaining true to the facts given in scripture, she brings these long-ago women to life and lets them speak to us in new and life-changing ways.

Obviously, this inscription refers to the entire series which turns previously marginalised women into the protagonists of these seminal biblical tales. On the surface level it seems suggestive of the idea of liberating difference that we identified as vital to the process of revision at the end of Chapter One. Central to the claim lies the promise of newness and the idea that, by using women as protagonists, Rivers will be giving us these stories in ways that “have never [been] heard before”. If we consider the ways in which biblical stories of women have been previously “utilise[d] ... to inculcate the values of conservative womanhood” and “reinscribe women into the patriarchal discourse”, as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests, it seems that the novel will be offering us something completely different— something “new” and “life-changing”, something that, in light of past ‘tellings’, might be liberatory (*But She Said* 27). However, as we will see, there is unfortunately nothing new or liberatory for women in the story of Mary as told in the novel *Unafraid*. As has been the case with the figure of Mary in both scripture and Christian myth and imagination, she is utilised for patriarchal purposes: instead of breaking with them, *Unafraid* reproduces discourses that deny women power and limit them to unrealistic and idealised traditional roles.

To start with, as the “humble girl” that “respond[s] in simple obedience”, we can argue that Mary functions as a paragon of womanly virtues meant to inspire the female reader to adopt the same Christian ideals (*Unafraid*, back cover). Consider, for instance, the scene of the immaculate

conception as portrayed in *Unafraid*: Grappling with her own desire to have been “born a man” and contemplating not only her own uncertain future, but also that of Israel, Mary “struggle[s]” with what the text tells us are “questions beyond her ability understand” (17-18). In spite of her own reservations regarding the chosen groom, Mary decides to “honour her mother” – in so far as she is carrying out the requests of her deceased father – and to “obey” their wishes in accepting the match. She then makes the following prayer:

Oh Lord God of Israel, I don't understand these things. Is it wrong to want to belong to you? My soul longs for you. Help me to be obedient, to be a proper wife to Joseph, for you are sovereign and must have chosen this man for me. Make me a woman after your own heart. Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me. (Rivers 18)

Moments after this prayer, an angel appears to the “favoured” Mary, informing her of the “blessing” that will be bestowed upon her, and waits for her answer, which comes in the following form: “I am the Lord’s servant... I am willing to accept whatever he wants” (21).

What is significant about this passage is the chronology of events. Even though Mary voices her desire to “be close to the Lord” and devote her life to his service earlier in the text (16), it is only after her explicit declaration of “obedience” that the angel appears, offering her God’s blessing. Furthermore, should we look closely at the prayer that precedes this appearance, her plea to be “a woman after [God’s] heart”, is prefigured by her desire to be “obedient”, a “proper wife” and to submit to God’s “sovereign” will – seemingly making the one synonymous with the other. The “right spirit” which she requests also seems to be embodied in her later promise of “servi[tude]” and submission. I suggest that in this scenario, Rivers’ *Unafraid* explicitly extols the conservative virtues of subordination and obedience. For a woman, merely desiring to be close to God does not suffice to meet the standards; she must first become a “woman of obedience”, as Rivers so aptly classifies Mary, in order to receive his blessing (9).

A similar trend can be noticed later in the novel, in a passage that I found overwhelming in its patriarchal ideology. When the pregnant Mary, “so near her time” has to travel to Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, the narrator eulogises the following display of inhuman grace and unselfishness:

Every few minutes, Joseph would glance back at his young wife riding their donkey. She kept her head bowed, but he noticed she held the saddle with tighter hands as the hours passed. Not once did she utter a word of

complaint, and only once did she lift her head and look at him with silent desperation, the mounting strain and discomfort clear on her face. "Oh, Joseph, let me walk." But when he did, she was quickly exhausted. (Rivers 32-33)

It is the imagery of her "bowed" head and her "silen[ce]" in spite of her discomfort which I found overwhelmingly suggestive of "the Gracious Lady" and, very significantly, also "the Silent Woman" that Sue Monk Kidd identifies as patriarchally constructed "stereotypical formula of what a woman should be" (204, 13). It is also useful to note that here, as with other of Mary's more important experiences, it is Joseph, her husband, and not Mary herself that becomes the focaliser in the text. Consequently, she is presented not as the active subject of her own experiences, but rather as an object of his male gaze – a gaze that I suggest idolises her as the "all-enduring, sacrificing woman", a concept I've appropriated from Rooney, who in a different context considers the dangers of "parading" this "idealised traditional image" as "the epitome of womanhood" (qtd. in Uwakweh 76). As he suggests, "such images may be used against women, as myths to justify doing nothing for them ... in the wrong hands, such myths may be useful, may be mis-used" (Rooney, qtd. in Uwakweh 76). On the basis of these two passages, we can argue that Rivers constructs the character of Mary to conform to some of the most basic and pervasive patriarchal and stereotypical ideals of femininity. Hence, in spite of its revisionist potential, the text does not break with an oppressive and disempowering ideology, but rather functions to reproduce and strengthen that ideology through the manner in which it idealises the subordinate, obedient and silently suffering Mary.

The novel also does not hesitate to emphasise and justify women's secondary status and need for spiritual guidance- one of the cornerstones of Christianity's patriarchal structure. In the prayer quoted above, we already saw reference to the fact that the spiritual issues Mary is grappling with are "beyond" her grasp and her "ability to understand", an observation that the text emphasizes by reiterating it twice in ten lines (19). This idea is however much better developed later in the text, when the previously composed and gracious Mary becomes quite selfish and pushy. Because of her need to be redeemed in the eyes of those who previously condemned her for her unorthodox pregnancy, she is insistent that Jesus' ministry begin. It is at this point that she is reprimanded by Joseph, who we are told speaks to her with "gentle firmness"- a designation that places him in a father-like position of authority as he offers her spiritual guidance (107).

Significantly, at this point in the novel Mary's behaviour is questioned by the omniscient narrator, who establishes a significant genealogy between Mary and Eve, the archetypal sinful woman: "Eve had been deceived in the Garden. Was Mary being tempted now?"(106). Given the discussion of the figure of Eve in the previous chapter, it should be obvious that such a statement plays on the idea of her as the original "temptress" with whom "sin [did] originate", a trope which has been used to justify what is considered women's inherent propensity for sin (Hutchins 671). The only thing that connects these two women and validates a comparison between the Eve of Genesis and the Mary of the Gospels, is that they are both woman. Consequently we can argue that the novel is playing the gender card here: by drawing a connection between Mary and Eve, that archetypal "wicked and fallen" woman who succumbed to temptation, the novel implicitly seems to suggest that Mary must have same propensity simply because she is a woman (Hutchins 671-672).

In addition to emphasizing Eve's sinful nature, and consequently all women's predisposition for sin, this simple statement also serves to draw on some of the other connotations made when Eve is referenced. As we have previously discussed, Eve's secondary creation, her role as helpmeet and her original sin, have all ensured that she functions to "justify the subordination of women to men" (Pazeraite 92). It is therefore not surprising that after this observation by the narrator and Joseph's offer of spiritual guidance, the naïve and childlike Mary serves as focaliser in the following passage:

The Lord had spoken once to her, but he had spoken four times to Joseph, directing their steps. Her husband lived with his eyes and ears open, seeking God's will...The Lord had chosen Joseph to be her husband, to be head of the household, and she would listen to his council. (107)

Here the novel justifies not only Mary's secondary status but also her social and spiritual submission to her husband. Thus, once again, rather than break with the oppressive traditions and ideologies of patriarchy that portray women as lesser beings in need of spiritual guidance, *Unafraid* functions to reiterate and reproduce such values.

Given all of the above, it becomes clear that Rivers' protagonist Mary, in spite of her newfound centrality, does not "speak to us in new and life-changing ways" (as might initially seem the case) and is in no way a liberatory figure for women. Instead she functions to uphold the patriarchal ideal in much the same way as women do in the biblical narrative. I would like to suggest that over and

above the intent of the author, this failure as revisionist feminist fiction is the result of two of Rivers' textual strategies: firstly, her adherence to the particulars of the biblical original with regard to her characterization of Mary; and secondly, her use of a mode of narration that, like the original, inscribes women into the position of object.

With reference to characterisation, I would like to suggest that Rivers actively thwarts any attempt she might make at newness and liberation by remaining "true to the facts given in scripture", as the above-quoted inscription claims. I say this because the "facts" given in scripture – which (as we discussed in Chapter One) inscribe women into the tales of their fathers, husbands or sons – are often influenced by the intentions of the male narrators who need women to serve their patriarchal agenda. As Davies suggests

What we learn from the Hebrew Bible about women is only what the male authors happened to regard as significant, and their activities are often described only in so far as they aid or hinder the plans of the male protagonists. (61)

Consequently, as long as Rivers remains true to these male-biased 'facts', she also remains true to the agenda of the original text. In effect she is keeping her female protagonist neatly within the design of the original male narrators and reiterating their perspectives – perspectives which *reflect* stereotypical ideas about women and make them serve patriarchal ideals and interests. Despite the fact that it retells a biblical tale using a woman as protagonist, it should therefore come as no surprise that *Unafraid* hardly succeeds in challenging or correcting negative gender stereotypes. Instead, as we have seen, the novel sticks to biblical and Christian models by portraying as an ideal that which Kidd classifies as a "negative feminin[ity] ... reflected in passivity, inertia, inferiority and dependency" – or, as she puts it in another instance, one which requires women to be "deferring, passive, silent, and secondary"(184, 82).

Furthermore, this failure of revisionist potential is also facilitated by the fact that Rivers employs third- and not first-person narration. I say this because such a mode of narration denies Mary the privileged position of narrator of what is supposed to be *her* tale and so avoids the development of a character that might function as an "active, self-determining agent", speaking in her own interests as an autonomous subject (Palmer 8). On a more superficial level, we can also argue that since third-person narration is "about the protagonist", rather than "by the protagonist" – and as such

“presents her as object” – this mode of narration fails to be revisionist in the sense that it mimics the oppressive tendencies of the biblical text (Peel 108).

Thus, basing our argument on Rivers’ *Unafraid*, we can see that simply inserting female presence and making a woman the central character of a tale, is not sufficient to turn ‘his story’ into ‘her story’. Such a move might be the most obvious textual strategy with which to counter the androcentric ideology of the biblical text, but even with a female protagonist at its centre, a tale can still ideologically remain ‘his story’, reproduce and uphold patriarchal values and reiterate what Kidd defines as the “father tongue”, that “dominant cultural language of patriarchy” (25). In light of such a disclosure, I would like to highlight two further revisionist textual strategies whereby a tale might free itself from the ideology of the original biblical text, namely first-person narration and character embellishment. In order to discuss the dynamics of these two strategies, I will take as an example of *The Song of Hannah* by Eva Etziolini-Halevy.

First- Person Narration and Character Embellishment: Obtaining Autonomy and Humanity

In an interview with Norm Goldman from the website Bookpleasure.com, Eva Etziolini-Halevy, who sees her novel *The Song of Hannah*⁴ as a mixture of “entertainment, religion and feminism”, summarises the plot as follows:

The Song of Hannah is based on the story of Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Pninah, which opens the book of I Samuel. Pninah had children and Hannah was barren; but Elkanah loved Hannah. Her rival provoked her, to make her angry; so she cried and would not eat. Eventually she prayed in the Temple and was granted the son she craved for: Samuel, who became a renowned prophet and leader. Taking off from this very short story, the novel's twisting plot follows the lives of these two women, their intricate relations with each other, with the husband they shared, and with Hannah's son, Samuel. It is a sensual novel of love, rejection, revenge and redemption through feminine strength and friendship. (Etziolini-Halevy, qtd. in Goldman)

As the above quotation suggests, there are two female protagonists in *The Song of Hannah*, namely Hannah and Pninah,⁵ two women who are included in the original text by virtue of having a familial

⁴ Interestingly this title is an intertextual reference to the “prayer of Hannah” found in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, one of the few literary works in the Bible accredited to women and something which Jonathan Kirsch suggests is “probably a remnant of the rich oral tradition that existed before... the bible” (255).

⁵ Although the title of the novel as well as the epilogue and prologue are accredited to Hannah and therefore suggests that she is the main protagonist, I find the novel’s attention equally distributed between both her and Pninah and even found myself considering Pninah’s story the more enticing one.

connection to the prophet Samuel – Hannah as his mother and Pninah as the obscure ‘other’ wife who causes her grief. The novel therefore fulfils our first requirement, namely that it moves the female characters that are mere footnotes in the tale of Samuel’s origins from the margin of a narrative about a man of God, to the centre of their own tales. However – and here *The Song of Hannah* differs greatly from *Unafraid* – Etziolini-Halevy also gives these “two biblical women their own voices” (Etziolini-Halevy, qtd. in Goldman). Thus, over and beyond just being the central characters of the revised tale, both also narrate the intricate details of their lives in alternate chapters of the book. Each functions as author of her own retrospective tale and interpreter of her own experience, and this endows these women with what Uwakweh defines as the “self-defining, liberating and cathartic” power of narration (75).

Theoretically such a textual strategy – that of first-person narration – corresponds with the idea of feminist revision for much the same reason that the use of female protagonists does, namely, that it acts as a counter-strategy to what Fiorenza so aptly terms the “marginalising and obliterating tendencies of the androcentric [biblical] text” (*But She Said* 26). Whereas the use of female protagonists addresses the physical aspect of women’s marginalisation, the further employment of these protagonists as narrators of their own tales in theory “gives voice to female silence” (Ostriker, *Feminist Revision* 28). In this sense such a counter-strategy also serves to revise the ideology of the biblical text as it challenges and corrects the stereotype of the lesser-than and insignificant woman by presenting her as subject rather than object. As Ostriker suggests, a woman as narrator is “revised” in the sense that she “is not woman as object at all, is not seen from the outside, but is instead a quintessential woman as subject, engaged in a quest for wholeness at once spiritual, psychological, and social” (Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 224). A similar sentiment is expressed by Uwakweh, who argues that the status of narrator endows a woman with power since “it proclaims [her] as a conscious being capable of independent thought and action” (75).

In light of the above argument, it is of interest to point out that both the first-person narrators of *The Song of Hannah* display the kind of independent thought and action absent from *Unafraid*. I am reminded, for instance, of Hannah’s utterance on the very first page that with regard to choosing a husband: “no one, not even my parents, would compel me to do something against my will” (Etziolini-Halevy 3). She not only voices this declaration of independence, but also follows it through with actions that go against everyone else’s idea of what is right for her. Similarly, when near the beginning of the novel Pninah gives Hannah, her closest friend, the following rather

modern advice – which Hannah of course follows – we also see her display what we might define as a highly independent train of thought (as a woman in a patriarchal society that is not concerned with women’s pleasure):

Hannah, I know that you will not be as stupid as I was and let a man make you pregnant before you are his wife. So you will not let Hanoach come to you. But you should let him embrace you and kiss you. Otherwise how will you know whether you like him well enough to be at his side in bed for the rest of your life? If you marry him, you will be the greatest lady in all the surrounding areas. But even a great lady lies with her husband, and if you cannot stand having his arms around you, how will you be able to bear it? (Etziolini-Halevy 30)

In both these instances we might observe how these women differ from *Unafraid’s* obedient Mary, who never acts in her own interest and definitely never does anything that might lead one to question her virtue.⁶ The independence and capacity for autonomous thought that both these women display is however, not the only way in which they differ from River’s pious protagonist. They also quibble with each other, argue with their parents, deceive their husband when necessary and in general display the quite human behaviour and selfish emotions that were either missing from Rivers’ Mary – or immediately renounced by the omniscient narrator. And yet in no way does this ‘unseemly’ behaviour form part of a logic that sees women as inherently flawed, for in spite of their more human moments, both women also frequently display bravery, kindness and wisdom, qualities that elevate them above the philandering, self-righteous and at times abusive husband they share. We can safely say that what lies at the heart of Etziolini-Halevy’s revision is the fact that she portrays her female protagonists not as one-dimensional footnotes (as in the original) or as epitomes of conservative womanhood (like Mary in *Unafraid*), but as fully-developed human beings capable of both good and evil.

With regards to such a realistic portrayal, we can begin to see the importance of Etziolini-Halevy’s embellishment of the original text for, as we’ve discussed, the original does not really give her much to work with besides the bare and often biased ‘facts’ regarding female characters – who for

⁶ In fact, with regard to acts of physical intimacy, Mary never does *anything* throughout *Unafraid*. Children appear, but where they might be coming from remains a mystery. This then is another area in which *The Song of Hannah*, as well as the other novels we will be discussing, markedly differ from *Unafraid*. For whereas River’s keeps the bedroom door, and for that matter also the birth chamber’s door, tightly shut in order to perpetuate the unrealistic image of the ‘angel in the house’, these novels, in intricate and provocative detail, take us into these spaces of female experience which “the representational practices of the dominant phallogocentric culture tend to marginalise or even erase” (Palmer 3).

the most part lack complexity, subtlety and any 'real' presence (Cranny-Francis 24). If a writer is therefore to portray her female characters as fully human- and not as the idealised constructs of men who see them as "basically good or bad... according to whether they help or hinder masculinist practices", that writer should step outside the limitations of the original facts and rely on the creative power of her imagination to fill in the blanks (Cranny-Francis 24). It is with regards to this observation that I would like to discuss the effects of character embellishment as a textual strategy to complement first-person narration and the use of female protagonists. To do this, I need to make a distinction between our two protagonists, Hannah and Pninah. Although both women display qualities that take the novel one step closer to – in the words of Etziolini-Halevy – "convey[ing] feminist messages", it is Pninah and not Hannah that dissents from the norm of good wife and voices the critique that in a sense subverts patriarchal and andocentric values (as qtd. in Goldman). This, I would like suggest, is a result of the greater liberty the author takes in her representation of Pninah. In order to consider the validity of such a statement, let us consider how she stays true to what biblical text tells us about Hannah, but deviates from this with regard to Pninah.

As the story opens we learn that Hannah, who is an intelligent and exceptionally beautiful young scribe, considers herself marked for greatness. The references to what she considers her calling as well as her outright refusal to marry a man simply because he is rich, handsome and charming, leave the reader expecting a character who will (unlike the marginalised woman of the biblical text) determine her own destiny throughout the course of the novel. These hopes are, however, quickly dashed when Hannah shares her premonition that the "special task" to which she has always "[known]" her "life would be devoted to", "[will] be connected to a man" (Etziolini-Halevy 4).

It is shortly after making this statement that Hannah consents to become the second wife of a man already married to her best friend, and comes to understand the fulfilment of *her* destiny as the facilitation of another's – her son's. As Etziolini-Halevy has her so confidently state: "he [would] be a prophet, a leader, and a judge" and "I knew that in bringing [him] to the Temple I was fulfilling the purpose of my life" (104;129). Furthermore, as if it is not enough that Hannah should see her own destiny as helping her son to fulfil his, Pninah also explicitly emphasises Hannah's inscription into the stories of husband and son near the end of the novel. This becomes apparent when – in spite of her status as first wife and her own role in the production of heirs – Pninah asserts that the continuation of their husband's bloodline is solely Hannah's destiny:

You were born to be exalted. You were aware almost as soon as you came out of your mother's womb that you had a special mission in life. And now you recognise it not only to be the mother of Samuel, but also the mother of Elkanah's family. Like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah who, each in her own way, built the house of Israel, so will you build the house of Elkanah that it may flourish even without him. (Etziolini-Halevy 287)

What becomes apparent from these statements is that Etziolini-Halevy chose to keep Hannah in the position of 'facilitator', like so many other biblical women. By staying true to facts of the original text, which mention her solely for this reason, she kept Hannah's purpose thoroughly aligned with the destinies of her husband and son. As such, it is hardly surprising that we find Hannah – despite some key moments of independence – acting and thinking in the interests of the men in her life. A case in point is her discovery of an affair that the unloved and much abused Pninah has been having. Although not personally affected by this act, she is concerned that it might disgrace her spouse and implicate her in the terrible sin of slighting one's husband: "If I did not tell Elkanah, I would be guilty of letting his wife dishonour him. It would be as if I were dishonouring him myself" (Etziolini-Halevy 106). Furthermore, showing an internalization of the patriarchal logic that sees women as "a means to an end" and values them primarily for their ability to ensure the "continuation of the male line" (Davies 62), Hannah berates herself for her initial inability to do exactly that:

Elkanah took me in his arms, but I would not be comforted. For I knew that only a fertile woman is like a blossoming vine. Her husband blesses her for giving him sons to carry forth his name. But a barren woman is like a withered vine. Her husband bemoans her, and although she is a beauty, a scribe, and a writer, she is nothing. (Etziolini-Halevy 68)

Clearly the lack of embellishment that might have wrestled Hannah's individual destiny away from her husband's and son's also prevents her from being a character that acts in and gives voice to her own interests, instead of identifying with theirs.

In contrast to Hannah, Pninah is an altogether different character, recreated to fight for her own interests. Choosing to work against the clearly negative connotations of the original, Etziolini-Halevy "take[s] up [Pninah's] cause" when she re-imagines and fleshes out the biblical footnote that is mentioned only because she "aggrieves" the "saintly" Hannah, with whom the text is primarily concerned (Etziolini-Halevy, qtd. in Goldman). To this end Etziolini-Halevy gives Pninah a story of her own and admits to trying to imagine the "injustices" done to her when she recreates

her as the unlucky and unloved first wife who must watch her husband marry and adore another (qtd. in Goldman). These injustices are of course related to the practice of polygamy, which is sanctioned by the Torah law. By embellishing the facts given in scripture and presenting Pninah as a character so obviously disadvantaged by this law as well as by her husband's neglect and abuse, Etziolini-Halevy places her in a position to rebel against, question and critique the very laws responsible for her oppression.

First, we watch her fight the sexist logic behind such a law when her husband informs her of his intent to take another wife:

“Hear me, Pninah,” [he said] “You are still young and innocent, and you don't yet understand matters as they are. There is a difference between a man and a woman. A woman will love only one man all her life. A man can love more than one woman.”

“How do you know this?” I asked in doubt.

“See how many men in Ramathayim have taken second wives.”

“But most are content with one wife,” I said in a low voice.

He shrugged.

“And how do you know that a woman loves only one man?” I queried, in rising agitation.

“I have never heard otherwise,” he responded with deep conviction.

“By our law a woman is not allowed to marry two men. But the heart is reckless and knows no laws. If a woman loved and knew a man who was not her husband, do you think that she would tell you of it?”

“Such would be a deviant woman, her deeds punishable by death,” he said scornfully. “If there were such women in our midst we would have heard of them. It need not concern us. I know that you will never love another man, and that is sufficient for me.”

In my anger I blurted out the words that, though I did not know it yet, foreshadowed that which was to be my future. “You're loving another woman might drive me to it.” (Etziolini-Halevy 50)

It is this final threat of another lover and the premonition that it will come true, as it indeed does, which anticipates Pninah's decision to disregard a law that allows a man to do what she might not. In spite of her own uncertainties, fears and the recurring belief that she is in fact being sinful, Pninah finds within herself the courage to act in her own interest and step outside of the parameters of Torah law to find solace and companionship in the arms of a Philistine who loves and cherishes her – as her abusive and selfish husband is incapable of doing. Thus, in spite of her enduring love for Elkanah – an aspect of the text that I found disconcerting for the way it makes her a willing victim for his abuse – I read Pninah as a liberating character in the sense that she is able to both

problematise the biased and sexist ideology of her society and look beyond it. As she observes to Hannah: “a law that permits a man to know a woman other than his wife but does not permit a woman to know a man other than her husband is unjust... [such a law] can be changed and it *will* be changed” (Etziolini-Halevy 112).

It is such a refusal to accept the patriarchal logic that so clearly disadvantages her which makes of Pninah the most feminist character we have discussed so far. I believe this to be the result of Etziolini-Halevy’s decision to re-imagine her and give her a life and personality outside of what scripture makes of her. This, however, raises the problem of setting, for in spite of the independent thinking and illicit actions with which she endows Pninah, the patriarchal realities of *The Song of Hannah*’s setting prevents Etziolini-Halevy from writing her into real freedom. Regardless of how ‘free’ her thinking might be, Pninah must still act in accordance with the laws so clearly not in her interest.

Therefore, unlike her husband, who is freely able to admit that he has relations with the maids regularly and “like all the [other] landowners”, Pninah’s own affair must remain a secret. As she observes to her lover: “If Elkanah suspects [her of adultery] he will drag her before the priests and they will kill [her]” (Etziolini-Halevy 273, 100). Furthermore, regardless of the rebellious nature of her thoughts, the law that demands that a “woman ... must submit to [her husband]” ensures that Pninah in the end is always “seen to acquiesce” to Elkanah’s authority and will (Etziolini-Halevy 50, 57). Finally, because of her fear of the Torah (which will make “the priests and elders and judges... side” with her husband, “ostracise” her from her people and rob her of her children), Pninah finds herself unable to walk out of an abusive and unequal relationship – despite her lover’s offer to marry her and “love...and raise [her children] as [his] own” (Etziolini-Halevy 108). Pninah remains powerless in a setting that dictates social behaviour through laws and ideologies that privilege men and place them in undisputable positions of power. Therefore, while she is no longer marginal to the story, she remains marginal in relation to the patriarchal ideology that ultimately still ‘controls’ and limits that story.

Such an observation leads me to theorise that the success of all three previously mentioned textual strategies – female protagonists, first-person narration and character embellishment– cannot be fully realised if the protagonists and narrators remain within the ideological limits of the patriarchal setting of the original biblical text. For this reason I would identify the fourth textual strategy

employed by writers to free their characters from the restrictions of patriarchal ideology and law as ‘ideological dislocation’. As Fiorenza suggests, biblical women’s stories which are originally “embedded in and structured by patriarchal culture and religion” must be “subjected... to a process of ... displacement... before we can re-imagine and recreate them in a feminist key” (*But She Said* 27).

Ideological Dislocation: In Positions of Power

In striking contrast to the biblical tales that take place in a setting dominated by the law of the father, men and the male God they serve, stories like Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* and Clysta Kinstler’s *The Moon under Her Fee* – which incidentally also employ all three of the previously defined strategies – take place in gynocentric social settings that are dominated by mothers, matriarchs and magnificent Goddesses. It is by paying closer attention to the manner in which their female characters exist outside the constraints of patriarchal ideology (and therefore function to subvert some of its most basic expectations) that I aim to show how such ideological displacement facilitates a feminist reimagining of women’s stories.

With regard to ideological dislocation, the relevance of a move to a matriarchal social organisation “in which the female is head ... and descent and inheritance are traced through the female line” is obvious: it suggests values and ideologies that completely contradict those of patriarchy (*The New Penguin English Dictionary* 858). As far as the significance of a Goddess-orientated setting is concerned, however, I think it is necessary to briefly identify the shift in thinking that it facilitates. As was explained in Chapter One, visions of a male God not only legitimate patriarchal practice but also limits women’s perceptions of themselves as related to the divine, and in so doing prevent them from perceiving themselves as powerful and important. It is for this reason that I suggest the inclusion of Goddess-cults to be one of the major strategies that these writers employ in order to locate their stories outside of the phallogocentric ideology of the original. I will pay more detailed attention to the empowering and liberating effect that Goddess imagery has for women in Chapter Four, but for the purpose of our argument here, we can rely on the following quotes by Adrienne Rich and Carol Christ to capture the core of the argument:

Images of pre-patriarchal goddess-cults did one thing; they told women that power, awesomeness, and centrality were theirs by nature, not by privilege or miracle. (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 81)

The simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of Goddess is the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power. (Christ, "Why Women" 277)

We can therefore theorise that in contrast to social systems which perceive the male as supreme and the only real authority, images of the Goddess as an awesome, independent and powerful entity locate those same qualities in the female and therefore empower women.

In the light of this observation, we may note that the female characters in *The Red Tent* – women who celebrate, invoke and associate with the many Goddesses that fill its pages – do not conform to the biblical or Christian stereotype of obedient and deferring women. Rather the powerful female figures that make up the heart and soul of this book are capable of acting with authority that stems not from their relation to one or other man, but from their selves and their ability to draw on what they perceive as the power of the Goddess. There are many examples of this in the text, but perhaps the most striking one is that of the elderly Adah, who in spite of her old age and infirmity, rises up against the patriarch Laban when he sexually harasses one of their daughters. Dinah recounts this as follows:

When she told Adah, my grandmother had beaten Laban with a pestle until he bled. She broke the horns of his favourite household god and when she threatened to curse him with boils and impotence, he swore never to touch his daughter again and made restitution. (Diamant 24)

Similarly, a couple of pages later, when Laban wants to promise a pre-pubescent Rachel in marriage to Jacob, Adah shows her power once more.

When they worked out the final terms, Laban went to Adah, so she could start planning the wedding. But Adah said no – "We are not barbarians who give children to wed."

Rachel could not even be promised, she told her husband...she was still unripe, having not bled. My grandmother claimed that Anath would curse the garden if Laban dared break this law and that she herself would find the strength to take a pestle to her husband's head again. (Diamant 27)

It becomes apparent that Adah, a weak old woman, is able to assert authority over Laban, the family's patriarch, either by punishing him or by vetoing his decisions. She is both able to *speak* her opinion, and able to assert that opinion with the type of physical action that is (in patriarchal thinking) normally reserved for men. It is the source of her power, however, that is interesting. In

the first passage we see her violating Laban's "favourite...god" in her own capacity, suggesting that she does not fear this masculine incarnation of divinity. After this she "threate[ns] to curse" him, indicating that she considers herself able to invoke some form of higher power against him. In the second passage she relies less on her own power as she clearly invokes the power of the Goddess and her laws in order to exert authority over Laban. Here the threat of her curse transforms to the threat of a curse by the Goddess "Anath", who is significantly later defined as the "defender of mothers" (Diamant 29). If one considers these two passages, it is safe to say that the power she displays as her own in the first passage stems from her belief in a powerful feminine deity whose example she can follow and on whose authority and power she can draw – as shown in the second passage. Furthermore, the fact that Laban responds to her threats with fear and compliance in both instances, indicates that he also recognises the power she calls on and wields.

This display of female power made me think of a passage by Ursula Le Guin in which she comments (in her critique of patriarchy) that "old men run things" and "old women live in the cracks between the walls, like roaches, like mice, a rustling sound, a squeaking" that we "can not hear" (Diamant 158). In comparison, I found the dynamics between Adah and Laban strikingly different. A woman that speaks and acts, while a man complies, makes for a clear reversal of patriarchal gender roles. What therefore becomes apparent is that women are able to act with power in a world that recognises the feminine as a powerful force. Consequently the women in *The Red Tent* are able to display a femininity, that contrary to patriarchal ideals, is neither passive, silent, nor secondary.⁷

In *The Moon under her Feet*, Goddess-worship is even more pronounced than in *The Red Tent*. Whereas in the latter, the Goddess is merely part of the women's unofficial daily lives, we encounter 'her' in her official manifestation in Kinstler's novel. Re-imagining the story of Mary

⁷ This example of Adah reminds me of another old woman who through her association with the Goddess, is also able to shun traditional gender roles. I am referring to the unconventional grandmother named Zhurleen in *Wisdom's Daughter*. As a woman who has "danced before Astarte's altar" and serves as Ashera's priestess, she does not look or speak as we imagine she must and quite starkly contrasts to the other two grandmothers who classify as good Jewish Daughters of the Law (Edghill 333, 364). The most obvious way in which we see her reject what is perceived to be the proper place and role of women, however, is through the stories she tells her granddaughter, Baalit. Instead of the more popular admission to "keep silent and sit still" because "[t]hat is what women must do" she endows Baalit with liberating ideas gained from "mysterious stories" in which "girls and goddesses [do] not sit spinning by the heart" but "[seek] treasures and [rescue] children, [create] gardens and [rule] the heavens" (Edghill 333, 106, 108, 106).

Magdalene, *The Moon under her Feet* transforms her into Mari Anath – the High Priestess or “Magdalene” to the Goddess who is “worshipped” in “her rightful place” in the Temple in Jerusalem “with Jehovah as her bridegroom and consort” (Kinstler 85)⁸. Most of the novel centres on the college of virgins and the convent of the priestesses of Ashera where Mari first serves as acolyte, priestess and later High Priestess. As such it gives a gynocentric and Goddess-centred version of the events that unfold in the four gospels.

Over and beyond the Goddess-centred setting of the novel, we also encounter forms of matriarchy and matrilineal descent to further contrast with patriarchal ideology and the patrilineal model of the Bible. The temple itself functions as a matriarchy since the position of High Priestess, a female position that is the highest form of power, is carried over in a matrilineal fashion. At the beginning of the novel, we learn that the current Magdalene, or High Priestess Anna is the daughter of the previous High Priestess, and that it is Anna’s daughter, Almah Mari, that reigns after her (Kinstler 15). Although it is our protagonist Mari Anath who reigns as Magdalene by the end of the novel, we are told earlier in the text that she functions as “only an alternate”, that “daughters of former High Priestesses would rank before [her]” and that she will rule only if “the present Magdalene, [should] have no daughter of her own”- which then obviously becomes the case (Kinstler 71).

Furthermore, the positions of ordinary priestesses also seem to function in a matrilineal fashion, since we are told that Mari Anath “as a firstborn daughter” has been “educated in the Temple as a [priestess] of the Mother”, like her mother and grandmother before her (Kinstler 85). We also see matrilineal inheritance laws function outside of the Temple when we are informed that Mari is a “princess of Bethany” which gives her the right to “own [her family’s] lands after her mother”, who “inherit[ed]” it from her “grandmother” (Kinstler 8; 72).

It is such a matriarchal social setting which makes our narrator and protagonist, Mari Anath, later the Magdalene, along with all the other powerful women that surround her, capable of a worldview that is remarkably critical of and contrasts quite starkly with that of patriarchy. We see for instance a negative and sober description of the violence of patriarchy, and of the hierarchical power that it exerts over what it considers its subjects, from the perspective of the High Priestess Anna. She

⁸ This might seem a completely imagined setting, but as we will show in Chapter Four, contrary to popular belief, archeological evidence and historical record show us that the Goddess was worshiped alongside Jehovah inside and outside the Temple for what is a surprisingly large part of Hebrew history.

defines the “patriarchs themselves” – a term that is mostly used with contempt – as “the chief enemies of Israel” because they “[subject] the people to endless war, [tax] them beyond reason to raise armies, and [take] sons and fathers from their families” (Kinstler 30).

It is these “patriarchs” who are also painted as antagonists to the Goddess in the text. We may note for instance that they are described as the “enemies of the Mother”, because of their introduction of “warrior kings and [a] warrior god” and the manner in which they “[profane]” and “[distain]” her “rites ” (Kinstler 30, 127). The competition between these two belief systems is further emphasised when we are told that the Goddess-cult is declining because these “warrior kings and hero gods [are] displacing the Great Mother” (Kinstler 62). The text is clearly setting up an antagonistic relationship in which patriarchy – its beliefs and practices – is considered the active culprit that “profane[s]”, “distain[s]” and “displac[es]” the Goddess and her rites. This antagonism is nowhere better summed up than when one character observes that “the patriarchs banished the Mother altogether for a time” and that they “will do it again if they can, and deny her memory as well” (Kinstler 85). Clearly the text sets up the Goddess-cult as an innocent victim of the patriarchy’s ill will and power-hunger, emphasising the unjust usurpation of what we are told is her “rightful” place in the people’s adoration (Kinstler 85).

Because patriarchy is therefore removed from its naturalised position of legitimate hegemony, the female characters in the text do not subscribe to the ‘rule of the father’ or husband. Consider for instance the “High Priestess Anna” who is described as the “Goddess-on-Earth” and a “living vision of perfection”(Kinstler 8). We are told that she is a “Temple-born...sacred child” of the previous High priestess – which suggests that she was conceived during a fertility rite (Kinstler 14). The reason such conception is significant is because it prevents claims of what Rich terms the “father-right”, one of the basic principles of patriarchy, and therefore thwarts assertions of possession or power over Anna (*Of Woman* 98). Consequently, we are informed of the fact that “she calls no man her father” and that, as stated before, she “is royal through her mother’s line”; a “princess of all Jerusalem and Bethlehem” (Kinstler 15). She is a figure free of patriarchal control.

Another powerful figure is Miriam of Scarios, famed midwife “to queens and princesses”, a healer who “travel[s] all over the world” and is “known to invite the heads of opposing kingdoms together and deftly arbitrate their disputes” (Kinstler 68; 81). Herself a servant of the Mother and one who “revere[s] [her] Law above all” (Kinstler 85), we are told that she

owned a palatial estate on the Greek Isle of Scarios...and lived there, mistress of her heart and life, beholden to no man ... Also rumoured was that she took lovers as she chose, belonging to none. (Kinstler 81)

Once again, there is a clear denial of patriarchal control as she, first of all, travels and works at her own discretion, is “mistress” of her own life and is “beholden to” or “belong[s]” to “no man”.

Similarly we may note that although the protagonist, Mari Anath, concedes to becoming the “sixth wife of the petty despot” Philip for political reasons, she is able to make the following assertion: “The terms of my marriage are secondary to my service of the Goddess” (Kinstler 80; 71). She does not see her marriage as bondage, because she “chooses” to marry Philip “freely” and later is able to “[leave] him freely” (Kinstler 127). Once she has freed herself from this obligation and has become the reigning High Priestess, she utters the following response in relation to being called the “the Great Harlot” and the “Whore of Babylon” by the “stiff-necked Pharisees”:

A woman... any woman – by their thinking, is only flesh. She must be subject to spirit – a male – one man who makes her his possession; else she is harlot. They have no other word for a free woman. (Kinstler 127)

She furthermore comments that “they hate their bodies” and so “turn their shame on [her]” (Kinstler 127). However, instead of internalising this shame, as women do when they internalize patriarchal thinking,⁹ Mari Anath rejects it and refuses to comply with thinking that labels her freedom from “one man’s...possession” as whoredom.

In these examples from *The Moon under Her Feet* we see how these three powerful women, all of whom are closely associated with the Goddess and matriarchal social organisation, are able to disregard patriarchal ideology. As they reject the ‘rule of the father’ or husband, they also deny the logic behind women’s secondary status, their inferiority to and dependency on some or other male counterpart. It is their feminist perspectives and positions of freedom which contrast sharply to the thinking of the patriarch Herod who we are told “is one of those who deny the power of the Mother and who treat women as possessions, to be bought and bred like mares and dams ... sold if they do not please” (Kinstler 93). Once again, what we see here is an assertion that it is only in instances where the Goddess is denied that women become man’s possession. This confirms the hypothesis

⁹ For more information on this tendency, see Rich’s *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.

that it is these characters' access to a powerful and respected Divine Feminine that enables their freedom.

By looking at the matriarchal and Goddess-orientated social settings of *The Red Tent* and *The Moon under her Feet* and the manner in which their protagonists neither endorse patriarchal ideology nor conform to its ideals of femininity, we can see the extent to which such ideological dislocation might serve to facilitate Fiorenza's "process of displacement" (referred to earlier) and in so doing enable a "feminist" "reimag[ing]" of women's stories. By (dis)placing their tales into gynocentric social settings, these writers are able to locate their female characters in a space in which patriarchy is no longer in a naturalised position of ideological hegemony. In such a space the characters are therefore no longer restrained by patriarchal logic and ideals and are able to act independently and give voice to views that go against the grain of patriarchal rhetoric.

Thus far we have considered four textual strategies that writers use to locate their revisions outside the ideology of the original text, and in so doing subvert and revise the literary conventions that reinforce women's inferior status. These strategies are the use of female protagonists, first-person narration, character embellishment and finally ideological dislocation. It is with regard to this last strategy, however, that I would like to suggest, in the following section, that novels that employ such ideological displacement might be read as feminist utopian fiction for the manner in which they construct feminist utopias as "part of a textual strategy aimed at politicising readers through the deconstruction of dominant ideologies" (Cranny-Francis 109).

Section Two: Feminist Desires and Feminist Utopias

Basing her theory on some of the most seminal utopian texts, namely Thomas More's *Utopia*, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, Ann Cranny-Francis considers the genre of utopian fiction and suggests that such texts are "characterised by their textual construction of a society more perfect than the writer's and contemporary reader's own" (108). She identifies this more perfect society as "the utopian figure" and remarks that while it is always "displaced... from the contemporary reader's own society", it is also like the reader's society and in many ways realistic and comparable (110, 124). It is this technique of displacement, so reminiscent of the concept of ideological dislocation discussed above, which she reads as one of the most noteworthy "estrangement" techniques employed by utopian texts that aim to "[position]" readers to "see [their] own society from a different perspective" (Cranny-Francis 110-111).

In the examples she gives, the utopian displacement is either geographical or temporal. When the displacement is geographical, as in More's *Utopia*, the "utopian state is represented as operating simultaneously with the reader's own society" and so "reinfor[ces] the comparison between the two" (Cranny-Francis 113). Alternatively, a temporal displacement means that the utopia is a future state, a forward projection of the "reader's own society purged of [its] injustices", as in Morris's *Looking Backward* or Bellamy's *News from Nowhere* (Cranny-Francis 113). In both instances, "the absent referent of this utopian figure is the writer's and contemporary reader's own society" and by being exposed to this utopia the reader "is positioned to see contemporary society differently" (Cranny-Francis 122, 111). Because "another social structure" with "many similarities" to, but also "apparent advantages over her/his own" is shown to exist, the "inevitability" and "naturalness" of the reader's own social order is challenged and he or she is positioned "to question [its] the mechanics" (Cranny-Francis 111).

If one applies Cranny-Francis' theory to the above reading of *The Moon under Her Feet* and *The Red Tent*, we can identify their gynocentric societies as temporally displaced feminist utopias. Because the Israel documented in the Bible served as the source of western patriarchal ideology – as was shown in Chapter One – one can argue that both that Israel and the writer's and reader's modern patriarchal society can be read as the same absent (and in some cases not-so-absent) referent to the utopian matriarchies we find in these texts. In line with this assumption, it is the temporal displacement of these novels to the kinds of pre-patriarchal, matrifocal and Goddess-orientated societies that allows them to function in much the same way as do the examples provided by Cranny-Francis. However, whereas the texts she looks at employ displacement and comparison through the manner in which they gaze forward to an improved society, the *The Moon under Her Feet* and *The Red Tent* are backward-gazing, to a society *before* the institutionalisation of patriarchal thinking and injustices.

In the same way that future utopias can therefore be read as "a means of showing that ...change is [indeed] possible" by providing the reader with visions of a changed future, I suggest that the reader, through exposure to utopias based in the past, is alerted to the fact that alternative societies once existed – and can therefore exist again (Cranny-Francis 116). Thus we can argue that novels like *The Red Tent* and *The Moon under Her Feet*, by displacing the narrative to a time before it was accepted as the only form of social organisation, demonstrate to readers that patriarchy is in no way

“a natural state” or an “inevitable” and unchangeable “political and social formation” (Cranny-Francis 111). Rather, it is “the construction of a particular parameter” and it is therefore “liable to transformation” (Cranny-Francis 116). As the reader is therefore allowed a glimpse of a utopian society in which Goddesses rule, the authority and bloodline of the mother is recognised and strong women can act with independence and autonomy – all of which challenges the legitimacy of a patriarchal social system – the reader is forced to re-evaluate the social, political and philosophical tenets of western civilization.

In light of the above discussion of the feminist views and opinions of female characters in *The Red Tent* and *The Moon under Her Feet*, I would also like to suggest that the ideologically displaced and politically liberated female characters in such fiction enable readers themselves to be vicariously repositioned into feminist reading positions. To support this view, I turn my attention to a novel we have not discussed so far – namely India Edghill’s *Wisdom’s Daughter*, which re-imagines the tale of the Queen of Sheba’s visit to the biblical kingdom of Solomon. As I apply Cranny-Francis’ theory of feminist utopian fiction to Edghill’s novel, I hope to illustrate that in the process of reading this novel, readers “find themselves confronting and deciphering, sometimes rigorously, a set of feminist ideas and debates” that will challenge and change their perception of their own society (Palmer 8).

Wisdom’s Daughter as Feminist Utopian Fiction

Unlike in *The Red Tent* and *The Moon under Her Feet*, where the setting is a pre-patriarchal Israel, the Israel in which the larger part of *Wisdom’s Daughter* is set is a fully-fledged patriarchy – one quite critical and dismissive of, and in some cases even hostile towards, anything that resembles the Divine Feminine or a powerful woman. At the other end of the spectrum, however, we find the country of Sheba, a clearly defined matriarchy in which the Queen of Sheba, Bilquis, rules with ultimate and unquestioned authority. Although the narration includes various other women and also men, the largest segments of the story are told from the perspective of Baalit, the imagined daughter of Solomon the Wise, ruler of Israel, closely followed by those sections narrated from the point of view of Queen Bilquis herself.

The novel opens with the perspective of Bilquis in Sheba, a country where “no king rules”, but where “a true queen” rules instead as a “woman” in her own “right” (Edghill 149, 175). In keeping with this statement, we are told that Sheba has been ruled by “a hundred generations of queens” and

“Sheba’s crown” is one that has “smoothly passed from mother to daughter, from aunt to niece, from sister to sister, in a chain of life unbroken for a thousand years” (Edghill 5,43). Furthermore, we are told that “it is the mother who weighs heaviest in the scales” and very fittingly it is the Goddess Illat that reigns as the “goddess-mother of Sheba” (Edghill 166, 6). As Bilquis’ story progresses we become aware that the kingdom of Sheba successfully functions as a monarchy and enjoys all-encompassing wealth as the result of a very well-controlled economy based on trade. Fulfilling our expectations of a strong political entity at this point in history, much like Solomon’s kingdom in Israel, Sheba’s apparent normality is hindered purely by the fact that it has a matriarchal social structure. Thus, from the very first pages of the narrative, the reader is exposed to a matriarchal utopia that is both geographically displaced from Israel and temporarily displaced from the contemporary reader’s own reality, while functioning as a completely credible alternative to both.

Due to her failure to produce a living female heir to the throne, Queen Bilquis must travel to Israel in search of the ‘daughter’ that she believes Illat has promised her. Through her interaction with emissaries, however, she comes to the following unpleasant conclusions regarding the country she is travelling to: that it is a land in which men “despise women”, that these men are “course and strange” “barbarians” and that they “[reckon] lineage by fathers instead of mothers” (Edghill 40, 31, 182). Once she arrives in Israel, Bilquis reinforces her initial assumptions by making the following critical summary of Solomon’s patriarchal kingdom:

For herself, Israel’s court was a revelation, and not a pleasant one. Oh, she had always known that Sheba was of a different world, a world in which men and women joined as partners in life’s dance. She had known that beyond the northern sands men ruled by force rather than by right. But until she saw for herself, she had not known what that truly meant... Here no woman governed her own life. Always it was given in charge – to a father, a brother, a husband. A son, if he were the only man alive to command her. Nothing belonged to her, all her riches were granted her as a gift, no, as a loan which must be constantly repaid with [labour] and obedience... worst off all, her children were not her own. In defiance of all sense, all decency, in this land a woman’s children belonged to the man who claimed her as a chattel. *As if the mere scatterer of seed has more claim than the woman who conceives and bears the fruit!* ... But that was the law here; the father’s right prevailed. As if any man could know he had sired a child! Always, always there was the possibility of doubt; a woman might be unfaithful, or merely mistaken. Only a mother could be claimed beyond any doubt. (Edghill 192)

What is noteworthy about this passage is that the reader's impression of Israel is shaped through Bilquis' critical observations. In this sense, the novel can be said to employ Cranny-Francis's concept of estrangement through its reversal of what is perceived to be normal. Whereas the modern reader, accustomed to the patriarchal ideology of our past and present, would normally perceive of Sheban society as the anomaly, seeing things from Bilquis' perspective forces him or her into a reading position that sees patriarchal practice as odd and abnormal.

In order to elaborate this point, I would like to consider a definition of matriarchy that I found in the 1980 edition of *The New Webster's Encyclopaedic Dictionary*. Whereas more modern dictionaries, influenced by the rise of feminism and the Woman's Movement, simply define matriarchy by stating what it is, the *Webster*, clearly still implicated in the ideology of its time, takes it one step further by including what it is not. It states that matriarchy is "the rule or predominance of the mother in a family; the principle of determining descent and inheritance on the mother's side and not the father's, as is done by certain primitive tribes". What we see here is a clear manifestation of patriarchal ideology in the sense that matrilineal descent is defined not simply by what it is, but also against what it is not – in this case the patrilineal practice which is 'normal' from a patriarchal point of view. Furthermore, matrilineal descent is also sketched in a negative light, not only by its apparent departure from the norm, but also by its "primitive" status. The implicit reference to Darwinian theories of development implies that patrilineal practice is more modern, advanced or superior.

I would like to suggest that we can identify the same tendency in *Wisdom's Daughter*, only here the power relations are reversed. In the novel, as becomes apparent from the above quotations, it is Bilquis who defines patriarchy by what it is not when she observes that "lineage [is reckoned] by fathers instead of mothers". It is the specific use of the words, "instead of", which implies that father-right is being imposed where mother-right 'should' prevail. Furthermore, it is by defining patriarchy as being in "defiance of all sense, all decency" and describing the men who adhere to these principles as "barbarians" that Bilquis places patriarchal practice as more backward or primitive. Her statement that "men rule by force rather than right" is another slight on patriarchy: it implies that men lack the "right" which in her view only women can have, and therefore engage in the kind of illegitimate control that requires "force". She furthermore backs up her claim regarding the illogical nature of social structures based on patrilineal descent when she explains how "[o]nly a mother [can] could be claimed beyond any doubt" (192). All these observations therefore serve to

paint patriarchy as the practice that deviates from the norm of matriarchy and the more natural and logical principle of mother-right.

It is such critical comments which align Bilquis with the “intelligent, critical and estranged commentator on... society” that Cranny-Francis identifies as the “utopian guide or traveller” in utopian fiction (111). It is this traveller/guide that serves as another “estrangement convention” employed by writers to offer the reader views of “alternative social arrangements” as well as “estranged” critiques of their own state (112). Obviously, Bilquis as a traveller from Sheba is able to look at patriarchal Israel with a critical distance that is not available to the subjects of the patriarchy. Consequently we can adopt Cranny-Francis’ reasoning and argue that Bilquis’ descriptions of Israel as opposed to Sheba “are the means by which the view of [patriarchal Israel] as a natural state, an inevitable or commonsense political and social formation, is challenged” (111).

It is through her interaction with our other main protagonist, Baalit, that Bilquis also performs the function of guide. As stated earlier, Baalit is the daughter of King Solomon and so lives her life confined to her father’s palace and the ideology of the patriarchal state. Although Baalit is much loved by her father, we are told that she is “clever, intrepid and perceptive” and struggles to conform to the ideals of the “meek, docile, obedient” daughter (Edghill 102). Instead of a desire to “weave and embroider, knead and bake sweet cakes” she wishes to “play upon the harp, and to dance; to drive a chariot; to read, and to write ... [and to] have the freedom [her] bothers [squander] so carelessly” (Edghill 102). She has, in many ways the mind of a modern woman. Although her father does his best to “bestow on her as much freedom as he [can]”, we are reminded that in the end, being a privileged “King’s Daughter” changes nothing (Edghill 102). In the thinking of patriarchal Israel,

Baalit [is] still only a girl. Few futures lay open to her. In the end, Baalit [will] live the life her father [chooses] for her... It [is] a father’s duty to choose wisely. And a daughter’s to obey. (Edghill 55)

As readers, we cannot help but empathise with Baalit and echo the thinking of the foreign character Amyntor, when he tells her that she is “wasted” in Israel (Edghill 223). And yet, despite her independent spirit and her desire for a ‘different’ life, Baalit knows no social reality but her own. Thus, when rumours start circulating regarding the Sheban queen’s arrival, Baalit reiterates

patriarchal thinking as she not only questions the possibility of a land where “a woman rule[s] over men” but also “wonder[s] at the thought of a woman who travel[s] the world as freely as a man” (Edghill 166, 146). We see her basing her perceptions of a powerful and liberated woman on the patriarchal assumption that no such a woman can exist.

In this sense the Sheban Queen is able to function as a guide to both alert Baalit (and by extension the readers of the novel) to the possibilities of female power and liberate her from the restrictions of patriarchal logic. Of course, the moment she is exposed to the utopian idea of Sheba, Baalit is able to start questioning the legitimacy of her own surroundings. There is a moment in the text where I think we can clearly see this process in motion. This takes place when the two women meet for the first time and the Queen remarks that she sees both Baalit’s father and her mother in her eyes. Baalit responds by saying: “How can you? My father stands there, across the garden. My mother has lain long years dead” (Edghill 190). At first glance this statement might simply refer to Baalit’s actual family structure, however, we can also argue that on a figurative level this might be suggestive of Baalit’s social reality, in which the father figure and the father-right is a direct presence whereas the mother is altogether excluded as an authoritative and influential figure. It is for this reason that Queen Bilquis’ reply is so significant: “Nevertheless, she too created you. She is there, Princess. She will always be there in you” (Edghill 190). Thus it is that Bilquis’ first words to Baalit are ones which – in a world where only the father counts – remind her of the presence and importance of the mother. The conversation that follows emphasises the significance of this moment:

...“Is it true that you are a djinn’s daughter?”... [Baalit asked]

“No...I am a woman like any other.”

“ No,” [Baalit responded], “ you are unlike any other. You rule a kingdom.”

“So does your father.”

“Yes, but he is a man. Men are born to rule.”

“ And women to be ruled?” the queen asked, and I could say only “And women to be ruled. That is the way things are done.”

“That is the way things are done here. But Israel is not all the world, little goddess” (Edghill 190)

In this passage Bilquis forces Baalit to become critical of and question one of the most fundamental principles on which patriarchal power is based, namely the idea of male supremacy; the sexist and determinist belief that “men are born to rule” while “women [are born] to be ruled”. Furthermore, it

is her guarantee that “Israel in not all the world” which functions to undermine patriarchy’s claim to sole legitimacy. Such a statement implies that there are other societies and systems of belief which function elsewhere, and denies the natural or absolute status of the patriarchal beliefs and practices to which Baalit has been subjected all her life. It is thus hardly surprising that Baalit should later remark that the Queen has “open[ed] a gate in [her] mind that [she] had not known was closed and barred” (Edghill 191):

Israel is not all the world, ... Always I had known that.

But now I believed it. A world lived strong and joyous beyond Jerusalem’s walls. And even if I never saw that bright world, I would know always that it waited there. (Edghill 191)

Although Baalit continues to develop feminist ideals and later, under the guidance of the Sheban Queen, learns to act in her own interest and defy patriarchal protocol in her quest to become worthy of the Sheban crown, this passage suggests that she initially draws power simply from the realization that there are alternatives to Israel’s social structure. Appropriating Cranny- Francis’ terminology, we can therefore argue that what has been set in motion by this first conversation is a slow “deconstruction of [the] ideology” that has kept her captive for so long (116).

What I would consequently also like to argue is that Baalit becomes a character “with whom readers may empathise” as she “embodies the common problems of the reader’s own society, its injustices [and] unwitting prejudices” (Cranny-Francis 115). In this sense, I would apply Cranny-Francis’ reasoning in saying that

this (empathetic) character [positions] readers ... to confront their own similar injustices, prejudices, attitudes; this character is one of the principal means by which the dominant ideologies of the reader’s own society are exposed as ideology and then analysed. The character’s reactions to the utopian citizen’s descriptions of ...[her] society is also the reader’s own and, again, this is a means of positioning the reader. (115)

Further appropriating Cranny-Francis’s theory, we can argue that is through their empathy for Baalit and their association with her that readers are forced into an active reading position, “engaging [them] in a revaluation” and scrutiny of the “gender ideology of patriarchy and its social practice” (Cranny-Francis 116, 133). By experiencing Baalit’s own character development and eventual liberation from patriarchal ideology and control, readers are shown “that change is possible” and that, like Baalit, they are also capable of effecting that change in their own lives

(Cranny-Francis 116). Similarly, with regard to the character of Bilquis, who serves as the utopian character who “embodies in an individualist sense the values” of this feminist utopia of Sheba, we can use Cranny-Francis theory to argue that she plays an interventionist role not only in the life of Baalit, but also the life of the reader (Cranny-Francis 115). As we have seen, it is in seeing the world from her perspective that the reader is engaged in a feminist reading position and in keeping with Cranny-Francis suggestion, we can argue that the construction of a feminist reading position is “a strategy in the production of a feminist subject” (125).

Ultimately, whether the reader identifies with Baalit, or sees the world from Bilquis’ perspective, I would like to suggest that *Wisdom’s Daughter* facilitates a re-evaluation of patriarchy’s logic and legitimacy. As it both actively critiques and offers us a feminist alternative to the patriarchal norm, the novel destabilises social paradigms that disempower women while at the same time, as Rich so beautifully puts it, it also “provides[s] a genesis... for speculations about the probability and nature of female power: a springboard into feminist desire” (*Of Woman Born* 81).

In this chapter we have discussed the textual strategies whereby women writers counter the literary representations of women as insignificant and underdeveloped others, creating gynocentric and feminist revisions of the biblical stories that previously marginalised and disempowered them. Furthermore, we have also considered how the novels that employ such strategies might function as feminist utopian fiction in the sense that they transform readers’ perceptions of their own society. Overall, we have begun to explore how these novels engage in a process of revision that holds many possibilities for the creation of new structures of meaning. As we continue our exploration of these novels in the following chapters, we will see that their revisionist potential extends beyond the realm of androcentric ideology to also transform the patriarchal myths and phallogocentric theology for which the Bible is responsible.

3

Rewriting the Story: Genesis, Gender and Revisionist Mythmaking

As long as we wrestle with an origin story we did not write,
our visions are limited; we are always responding to a given text and a
set of assumptions in which we had no part, arguing against the myth of
male domination as 'divinely ordained'.

-Deborah Grenn ¹

Touch me not, thou shalt not touch, command the texts.
Thou shalt not uncover. But I shall.
Thou shalt not eat it lest ye die. I shall not surely die...
What do these stories mean to me and what do I mean to them?
I cannot tell until I write.

-Alicia Ostriker²

In the previous chapter, we considered the textual strategies employed by women writers to counter the different components that make the biblical stories androcentric and phallogocentric narratives. In this chapter, however, we take that exploration a step further. In line with the saying that suggests that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, we will see how these writers, when they locate their revisions in female perspectives and feminist agendas, address much more than the individual parts of the story. Instead they also rewrite the whole, the story itself. Like Alicia Ostriker, who asserts her intention to “make [the] story open to [her]” as she “climbs down into its throat”, to “invade the tents/texts” of the father and find new meaning hidden within, these writers violate the integrity of the original text and transform its very nature as they rewrite it (*The Nakedness* 7-8).

Significantly such rewriting can, arguably, become an act of what Ostriker, in one of her works, defines as “revisionist mythmaking”:

¹ “Lilith’s Fire”, page 44

² *The Nakedness of the Fathers*, page 8.

Whenever a [writer] employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by culture, the [writer] is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the *old* vessel filled with *new* wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual [writer] but ultimately making cultural change possible. (Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 212-213)

Such an endeavour is important because, as we discussed in Chapter One, most of the biblical tales – tales which silence, marginalise and function to subjugate women – have been commonly accepted as portraying the will of God and have, as such, functioned as prescriptive texts. In effect they are the phallogentric myths on which our patriarchal culture is based. It is in this context that we can begin to see how the re-writings of such tales, such myths, can hold the “potential” to be “revisionist” in the sense that they not only undermine the original stories and their patriarchal agendas, but also “appropriate them for altered ends”, liberating women from the positions they were originally ‘written into’. As Ostriker explains, myths – a category which includes “folktales, legends [as well as] scripture” – are “the sanctuaries of language where our meaning for ‘male’ and ‘female’ are stored”; to “rewrite them from a female point of view” is both a means of “redefining ...women and culture” and a way of “discover[ing] new possibilities for meaning” (*Stealing the Language* 11, 211, 11).

In light of such theory, I have chosen to consider two novels in this chapter, namely Elsie Aidinoff’s *The Garden* and Ann Chamberlin’s *Leaving Eden*, both of which, as the titles so obviously suggest, revise the story of the beginning and the events that transpired in the legendary Garden of Eden, as found in Genesis. I thought it a fitting selection since, as was pointed out in Chapter Two, there are few stories that have historically had such a negative effect on the perceived role and position of women in society as the creation account of Genesis 1-3. As a result there can be few stories that hold such immense potential for revisionist mythmaking.

Thus it is that in what follows we will consider these two novels and the way in which both writers have employed what Adrienne Rich terms the “subversive function of the imagination” in order to “transform” and “transcend” the original Genesis tale, giving readers new stories, new myths and new meanings (“When We Dead” 43). First we will pay attention to the less controversial but still provocative *The Garden* and its revision of Genesis gender roles through minor changes to plot and character. This will be followed by a discussion of the highly contentious *Leaving Eden*, a novel that completely alters the familiar tale of origins to give us new ideas regarding the phallogentric

‘beginning’. As we explore these texts and trace the manner in which they offer “transforming alternatives” to original scripture – alternatives which undermine, destabilise and ultimately openly challenge patriarchal tropes, symbols and thinking – this chapter will propose that such tales become “revisionist mythology” and offer readers new ideas on gender, society and history (*Stealing* 211; *Feminist* 78).

Elsie Aidinoff’s *The Garden* and the Reversal of Genesis Gender Roles

In Chapter One we pointed out that Elsie Aidinoff’s *The Garden* rewrites the familiar tale of creation found in Genesis 1-3. Maintaining the basic plot structure and characters of the original, Aidinoff’s final tale of Adam and Eve, the serpent, the sacred tree and the God that places them all in the Garden of Eden for his pleasure, is a product only slightly altered. Yet, through what might initially seem only superficial changes to the classic tale of origin and original sin, this novel – in its capacity as revisionist mythology – breathes new life into an old tale. As Aidinoff explains in the Author’s Note at the end of the novel: “*The Garden* is a different perspective on Eden” because “Eve is the protagonist and has central place” in the narrative (Aidinoff 403). In this sense we can already see how the novel meets the basic requirement of revisionist fiction we theorised in Chapter Two as it transforms the previously ‘othered’ female character into both the subject and narrator of the tale. However such a role reversal is but the first of many that enables *The Garden* to not only transform our image of Eve as the second in creation and the first to sin, but also to undermine and revise the traditional gender roles prescribed by the story in which she originally appears.

At the onset of the novel, we learn that that while a rather tempestuous, selfish and at times childish God is raising Adam on the one side of Eden, Eve herself has been placed in the keeping of the Serpent, a wise and benevolent character that is – through many intertextual references, both implicit and explicit – linked to Sophia/Wisdom, the biblical embodiment of the Divine Feminine extolled in Proverbs.³ Unfortunately, the characterization of these two ‘divine’ entities, although very interesting, is a discussion we shall have to defer.⁴ What is, however, of importance for our

³ For more information on the topic of Sophia/Wisdom, see for instance *The Divine Feminine in Biblical Wisdom Literature* by Rabbi Rami Shapiro.

⁴ It might be of interest, considering the novel’s many intertextual references and similarities to some of the Gnostic scriptures, to explore how this portrayal of God and the serpent echoes Gnostic ideas of the lower creator or demiurge who creates an imperfect world without the true God’s knowledge, and of the serpent who brings enlightenment to humanity against his tyrannical will. For further reference see Pearson, Walker and Luttikhuizen.

current line of discussion is the type of education Eve receives from her egalitarian and judicious tutor, the Serpent. We may note, for instance, that when explaining the concept of ‘mates’ to Eve, the Serpent does not follow the familiar “male and female” format we find in Genesis, but rather states, “females and males... they’re each other’s mates” (Gen. 1. 27; Aidinoff 34). This may seem a small change, but what is implicit to a statement that mentions first females and then males, is a reversal of order, a change from an ideology that privileges the masculine to one that privileges the feminine. It is therefore in this simple play on language that I suggest we can locate the core of the novel’s revision of the gender hierarchy prescribed by Genesis.

Just like the biblical text that explains how God created “male and female”, or describes the first couple as “man and *his* wife” [emphasis added], popular imagination has always given a specific order to the Genesis duo, namely ‘Adam and Eve’ (Gen. 1. 27, 2. 25.). This is just one of many examples of the androcentric nature of a language which always privileges the masculine. And yet, one could also argue that it is a tangible example of Eve’s secondary status as it literally places her second in order and importance. This is particularly significant because, as was pointed out in Chapter One, it is by virtue of the second creation account found in Genesis 2 that the popular perception of Eve has predominantly been that of a secondary character, a helper and mate (or “helpmate” in some translations), a creature created for Adam’s benefit, to counter his loneliness. According to Jerome Gellman, this portrayal of Eve as secondary and lesser than Adam “has helped shape gender attitudes for the Western religious tradition” (320). As he points out, “[t]he story of Adam and Eve ... has historically been taken to endorse male normativity, especially in sexuality... Adam is the normative sexual being to whom Eve is subordinate” (Gellman 320). For this reason it is so refreshing when the Serpent explains to Eve (in the lesson mentioned above) that “Adam is the mate for Eve” and not the other way around, completely reversing the Genesis construction of a female as created ‘for’ male satisfaction.

This reversal of biblically constructed gender roles can, however, be most obviously seen in *The Garden’s* characterisation of Adam and Eve. Or perhaps I should say the characterisation of *Eve* and *Adam*, for the reversal made explicit by the Serpent when it constructs Adam as Eve’s mate and reorders “male and female” into “female and male”, sets the tone for the entire novel’s approach to gender. Accordingly the character of Eve, placed in a position of prominence as both the protagonist and narrator of the tale, also functions as the more developed character. As the following discussion makes clear, in a hierarchy based on intelligence, resourcefulness,

independence and character, the first couple would indeed be best described as ‘Eve’, and then ‘Adam’.

Rethinking the First Couple

In *The Garden*, Aidinoff portrays her Adam – in contrast to the Adam of patriarchal myth – as a bit of dimwitted simpleton. In spite of the emphasis on his good looks, athleticism and physical power, we are constantly reminded of his lack of intelligence. As God himself observes, Adam is “not very bright” and “takes a long time with his lessons” (Aidinoff 45). The text makes constant reference to this shortcoming and as a character Adam seems pigeon-holed by the fact that he does not have “much brain” (Aidinoff 60). Apart from his clear lack of savvy, Adam is also characterized by – ironically – his lack of character (Aidinoff 45). In this regard, one of the most significant moments in the novel is the moment at which both Eve and the reader meet Adam for the first time, and he arrives behind schedule. God rebukes him and requests an explanation for his tardiness, but the bashful Adam simply stands there “twist[ing] his big toe in the sand and look[ing] embarrassed”, much like an overgrown child (Aidinoff 50). When he finally responds, all the while “star[ing] at his toe”, he stumbles through a badly articulated apology and then ends with a sigh and a doleful, “Oh, dear” (Aidinoff 50-51). The image created by this quite amusing description of Adam’s sheepishness hardly flatters the supposed pinnacle of creation.

As the most direct victim of God’s “cantankerous”, overbearing and selfish personality, Adam is also portrayed as weak-willed and in effect comes across as – in the words of the Serpent – rather “docile” (Aidinoff 54, 266). As with his lack of intelligence, the text gives us ample evidence of Adam’s weak and docile nature. To Adam’s final detriment, it is this particular characteristic that makes him yield to God’s unwise commands when he rapes Eve against his own better judgment (Aidinoff 61).⁵ Although initially unwilling, Adam goes along with this forced act of copulation as with everything else in his life. In spite of Eve’s cries of pain, his own recognition that she is hurting and that “[he] [does not] want to hurt her”, he follows God’s command to “go on” and “keep” at it; he ejaculates and then falls asleep (Aidinoff 101). It is the final description of Adam as

⁵ God of course does not intend for Adam to actually rape Eve. He is simply overeager to see if “it works between [his creations] the way [that he] planned” (Aidinoff 61). Consequently, he encourages Adam to ‘finish’ the experiment in spite of the fact that Eve is not ready for the encounter. Despite Eve’s tears, God is adamant that “no harm” has been done (Aidinoff 100). As always, it is up to the Serpent to act as the voice of reason and point out that “[Adam] as good as raped [Eve]...with [God’s] encouragement” (Aidinoff 100).

he lies there, “mouth open, arms akimbo, God hovering behind him”, which defines his character in the novel as a whole: a limp and lifeless puppet, incapable of independent thought and action, who only comes to life when others pull his strings.

Given the above discussion, it becomes apparent that Aidinoff, through her characterization of Adam as an underdeveloped and weak character, is undermining ideas of male supremacy. As the God of *The Garden* so ironically remarks, Adam is definitely “not perfect” and does not live up to expectations of what is supposedly God’s superior creation (45). In fact, if we consider his weak will and inferior intellect, Aidinoff’s Adam more closely resembles the lesser ‘woman’ portrayed by the early church as a “defective [creature]” not entirely created in the image of God, than the perfectly crafted man who is supposed to be her intellectual and moral superior (Japinga 76-77). In light of this portrayal of Adam, I suggest that Aidinoff is purposefully parodying early theological descriptions of women as “weak”, “feebler in mind” and “with a childlike intellect[s]” in an attempt to destabilise this particular patriarchal trope (Japinga 76-77).⁶

Corresponding to such theory, the much more impressive Eve of *The Garden* is a character who greatly exceeds our expectations of the secondary and lesser first woman portrayed in popular Christian myth. In spite of her stereotypical beauty, what seems to lie at the centre of Eve’s character is her “exciting mind”, her “clever[ness]” and her “wonderful way of looking at the universe” (Aidinoff 197, 18, 271). Her obvious intelligence stands in stark contrast to Adam’s lack thereof, and this becomes one of the most significant ways in which Aidinoff uses the character of Eve (in comparison with Adam), to overturn gender expectations. As God observes at one point, Adam will be “good ... for brawn” while Eve is the “bright” one with the “brain” (61). In having God make such a statement, Aidinoff is effectively subverting and reversing the classic Cartesian dualism in which man is associated with the sublime mind and women with the lesser and abject body.

Apart from her intelligence, Eve is also a much more rounded and developed character than Adam. As the Serpent so often remarks, Eve is at heart an “artist”, full of unexpected “ideas” and

⁶ Perhaps – through the puppet imagery – Aidinoff is also mocking man’s idea of himself as the ultimate authority. I am reminded of a poem by Alicia Ostriker in which she describes Adam as a pompous creature, “Puffing up his chest, thinking the world of himself/ Standing there saying *Lie down and hold still, / Waving his scepter... / ... like the boss of something.*” She then asks the vital question, “Though wasn’t he only taking orders from a bigger boss...?” (“Lilith Jumps the Fence” in “The Lilith Poems”, 252).

“emotions” (Aidinoff 18, 37). Accordingly, we also see her as potter, weaver, storyteller and overall inventor, always coming up with tools and utensils of all kinds (Aidinoff 17, 27, 277). Another of Eve’s impressive characteristics is her exploratory nature: while Adam fulfils the usual feminine role of homebody, remaining within Eden, it is Eve who takes on the very masculine role of explorer and decides to “find out for [her]self” what exists “outside the Garden” (Aidinoff 118).

In general, as a many-faceted and multi-dimensional character, the resourceful and industrious young Eve outshines the docile and childlike Adam in all aspects. In fact, while we are aware that both characters are “barely more than children”, Eve undergoes constant development and radiates a maturity and wisdom beyond that of Adam, who remains a somewhat unsure and uneasy “boy” (Aidinoff 61, 50). We can therefore argue that just as Aidinoff had the Serpent ‘theoretically’ reverse gender roles in his lessons to Eve, so her portrayal of these two characters ‘physically’ reverses our conventional expectations of both masculinity and femininity. Whereas patriarchal biblical ideology and Christian thinking clearly places the male in a position of supremacy, *The Garden* subverts and destabilizes this myth by making Eve the more developed and superior character.

The Alternative and Not-So-Biblical Eve

There are also other ways in which *The Garden* employs the intellectually ‘redeemed’ Eve to challenge biblical ideas of gender. One may note for instance that Eve’s rationality, her inquisitive nature and her inability to accept things at face value serves as a mechanism that allows the text to problematise the Genesis myth of her creation. Her critique of what the Serpent defines as the creation “myth” starts as follows:

“Where did [Adam] come from?” [Asked Eve.]

“Where everything else comes from. God made him.” [The Serpent replied.]

“From what?”

“From earth.”

“Did God make me the same way? Did I come from earth too?”

“Well... [one] story says God made you from Adam’s rib.”

“What!” [Eve cried]. “That’s impossible! Adam’s rib?” ... “How could he make me from Adam’s rib?”

Anyway, why would he want to? That’s stupid.”

“Foolish, not stupid,” said the Serpent absentmindedly. “Find a better word.” The Serpent never forgot its responsibility as a tutor.

“Ridiculous,” I said. “Why a used bone? And why leave Adam with one less rib?” [Eve] shook [her] head. The idea seemed preposterous. (Aidinoff 35)

A couple of pages later, Eve further problematizes this account when she investigates the truth of the above story for herself and tries to find a scar in the place where God would have removed Adam’s rib. None is to be found and with a clearly uncomfortable God refusing to explain her finds, Eve asks the following questions: “And why did you make me from Adam’s rib, anyway? It seems so unnecessary. Why not make me from the dust the way you made Adam?” (Aidinoff 53). Aidinoff of course never allows God to provide Eve with a direct answer or explanation. In fact, his shifty attitude, his evasive responses and the fact that he is both sweating quite heavily and unable to look Eve in the eyes when he answers her, all force readers to question the truth of any of his statements (Aidinoff 53). The significance of such incidents therefore does not lie in the responses they evoke, but rather in the fact that they give Eve the chance to question the legitimacy, logic and truth value of the second creation account. As we watch her struggles to reconcile the myth of her creation with reality of her situation, the reader is forced to engage with the same questions as Eve.

Ironically it is Adam who, in an uncharacteristically opinionated moment, brings an end to this enquiry by observing that he doesn’t “see how [Eve] could have been made from [his] rib” since he still “[has] all [his] ribs” [emphasis added], shaking his head in denial of the grounds for such a tale (Aidinoff 54). Hence, in the end, the text employs Eve’s (and subsequently also Adam’s) logic to question the version of the creation story on which the ideas regarding woman’s secondary status and lesser being is founded. As the conversation draws to its inconclusive close, readers are therefore left to ponder the legitimacy of the biblical story of creation.

Given the above discussion, it is important to note that as Eve questions the myth of her origins, doubting its logic and truth, she also rejects the construction of gender based on it. She actively refuses to be “the kind of creature” that God intended or to fulfil what he considers to be her proper “role in the world” (Aidinoff 244). A case in point is that shortly after her rape, Eve resists her assigned role as the mother of humanity, telling the Serpent that “[n]obody asked [her] if [she] wanted to be the mother of all ... people”, and stating that she definitely “[doesn’t]” want to (Aidinoff 155). In a similar scene later in the novel, when Eve sees God for the first time after her rape, he beckons her to come closer and give him a hug. Eve is however adamant that she “[does not] want to be touched” (Aidinoff 244). It is then that God makes the following statement: “Eve,

how can you say that! ... How can I not embrace you? You're so beautiful! You're made to embrace! *I made you to be embraced*" (Aidinoff 244). Eve responds by saying: "You didn't ask *me* about it ... [a]nd I don't like it" (Aidinoff 244). It is these refusals, as well as the decisive manner in which Eve stands up to God, which not only beautifully contrast the previously discussed image of Adam as God's puppet, but which also display her ability to refuse the gender-based roles she is prescribed.

It is Eve's refusal to be embraced and to be the mother of humanity that makes her a character more akin to the mythical creature Lilith than the biblical woman Eve. However, before continuing with this argument, it will be useful to first consider the myth of Lilith and what it entails. According to Jewish folklore and myth, it is Lilith and not Eve who is the first female creature and so "Adam's first companion" (Rousseau 95). However, unlike Eve, who is made from Adam's rib, Lilith is no "secondary creation" (Rousseau 94). Rather, she is a creature who is "like Adam, drawn from the dust of the earth" (Rousseau 95). As with most myths, there are different versions of this tale, but the basics remain the same. Essentially Lilith does not succeed in being a pleasing mate for Adam: she is "too demanding" herself, "never agree[s] to Adam's demands" and finally refuses to "lie beneath him in the 'missionary position' favoured by male-dominated societies" (Rousseau 96; Walker 541). Therefore, scorning "Adam's sexual crudity", Lilith either flees Eden or is expelled from it and continues "to make her home at the Red Sea" (Walker 541). Here Lilith spends her time "coupling with 'demons'", refuses God's commands to return to Adam's side and finally chooses her freedom over her role as mother, even as God threatens to kill one of her "demon-children" for each day that she remains absent from Adam's side (Walker 541; Rousseau 96). Given Lilith's refusal to return, God is then forced to create another 'first' woman, namely the "Eve we know" – "Adam's obedient companion" and "Lilith's more docile replacement" (Rousseau 96; Walker 541).⁷

⁷ I think it is important to note here that according to Jewish legend, Lilith becomes a kind of demon herself after she is cursed. In fact, the explanation one is most likely to find, should one search for information on Lilith, is that she is a form of Night-Hag who not only "attempts to seduce men" but also "slips between a man and his wife to steal drops of his semen and make demons from it to plague mankind" (Ostriker, *Lilith* 257). According to Walker, Jews "were still manufacturing amulets to keep away the lilim" – Lilith's lustful demon- daughters – until "well into the Middle Ages" (542). With regard to the obvious demotion from first wife (and initially goddess) to demon, Lilith's story sends a clear message as to the fate of independent women.

As this suggests, Lilith's character is marked by independence and dissent, much like the character of Eve in *The Garden*. Both women seem to resist the role of the secondary and subservient woman. It is however Lilith's refusal to lie beneath Adam- a detail which remains constant in most versions of the myth- which initially caught my attention. In *The Garden*, even before she is raped by Adam – an act which of course occurs in the missionary position and therefore symbolises the subordination she so obviously resists – Eve tells the Serpent that she doesn't "like the idea of Adam ... on top of [her] ...like the animals" (Aidinoff 36, ellipsis in original). This statement directly links her own dissent to that of Lilith: both characters are as unwilling to lie beneath a man during coupling as they are to be subordinated by him. If we consider this similarity, together with Eve's rejection of motherhood and womanly roles in the face of her own desires, we can begin to see how the Eve of *The Garden* in temperament more closely resembles the mythical Lilith than the biblical Eve.

The manner in which Aidinoff's Eve resembles Lilith has further implications for the novel's representations of gender. As Rousseau argues, Lilith is the "symbolic reverse of [the biblical] Eve" and perceptions of her as created to be Lilith's more submissive substitute, "illuminate the preconceptions and myths at the root of structures representative of the female" (Rousseau 97; 95). Thus, whereas Eve represents woman as the second sex, created both as afterthought and from the secondary material of man's rib, in order to fulfil his needs and desires, Lilith "is a creation independent of Adam: she is not taken from his flesh, or even from one of his desires" (Rousseau 96). Instead, created from dust like Adam, she is a similar and equal creation- signifying women's equal status. For this reason Aidinoff's decision to associate her Eve with Lilith offers an alternative vision of what it means to be female. As she rejects preconceived ideas about what she *should* be, "take[s] on a life of [her] own" and becomes someone who is "certainly not what God had in mind when he set out to make a woman", Aidinoff's Eve offers readers a transforming alternative to the gender roles represented by the biblical Eve (Aidinoff 266).

Just as Aidinoff's novel draws on the myth of Lilith to give us a stronger Eve, redeemed from her secondary status, so it also draws from Gnostic literature to liberate Eve from the implications of her 'original sin'. In Gnostic texts such as the *Testimony of Truth*, *Hypostasis of the Archons* and *On the Origin of the World*, the Serpent is not portrayed in a negative light, but as a "teacher" who instructs mankind, an "emissary of wisdom" and a "a revealer of gnosis" who "puts knowledge in men" (Pearson 120; Salisbury 121; Pearson 119, 120). Therefore, "Eve's temptation by the serpent

[is] rendered as a positive act” in these texts; it is not really as a ‘temptation’ at all, but rather an act of guidance (Salisbury 121). In a similar sense, when Eve eats of the fruit, it is not an act of sin, but rather an act of wisdom: as Luttikhuizen argues, the Gnostic Eve is one who through her actions “awakens man’s capacity for reason” (71). In this sense, in some of the Gnostic scriptures, like those mentioned above, as well as in the *Apocrypha of John*, Eve is painted as “a heroine who free[s] humanity from ignorance” instead of the “mother of all lies and the root of all evil” painted by orthodox Christian thought (Salisbury 121; Hutchins 672).

On this basis, we can argue that Aidinoff draws from Gnostic texts when she makes the Serpent Eve’s “mentor, guide and teacher” – one who, in contrast to the tyrannical and selfish God of the Garden, teaches Eve about science as well as myth, about conservation, consideration and self-expression (Aidinoff 5). There is further evidence of Gnostic influence when she portrays the eating of the forbidden fruit as the result not of deception by a cunning trickster, but rather as a carefully considered decision guided by a wise mentor. To this end Aidinoff’s Serpent transforms and extends the biblical promise of ‘god-like’ nature and the knowledge of both good and evil⁸ into something not entirely positive when it offers Adam and Eve the following choice:

If you eat of the apple, in certain respects you’ll resemble God. You will no longer be innocent: you’ll know good and you’ll know evil, and be able to choose between them. You’ll be responsible for your actions. And you’ll be free to choose the course of your lives ... You, and all people, for all time ... But ... your freedom comes at a price. You’ll have to work for your survival ... here you chafe at God’s commands. Outside you’ll have other masters ... You’ll work endless days and not reap the fruits of your labor. You’ll suffer pain and anger and hardship. And at the end of such a life only death awaits ... Much of it is terrible ... And you *must* be aware of that before you make your choice. But much will be beautiful also. In the outside world, the abilities and talents God gave you will be free to flourish and, like the wind, take on lives of their own.
(Aidinoff 366)

As is apparent from the above passage, the Serpent offers knowledge, choice and free will, but at the cost of much pain and suffering. Thus, when Eve makes the decision to eat, it is an admirable one, since she chooses autonomy and knowledge in the face of adversity:

⁸ Compare Genesis 3:4-5: “The serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the days you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

If we stay in the Garden ... [w]e'll be like the animals, obeying God, turning to the right and the left as he moves his hands ... Comfortable, but not *free*. Always we'll be under God's control... I want to be one of the things that gets away from God and takes on its own spirit. (Aidinoff 373)

It is Eve's insistence on free will, coupled with her constant search for knowledge and answers throughout the novel, which brings Aidinoff's Eve closer to the Gnostic Eve than the biblical one. By undermining notions of original sin and Eve as the archetypal fallen woman, such a portrayal further serves to offer readers transforming alternatives to the generally accepted meanings of the Genesis story and its implications for women.

Considering everything discussed above, we can begin to see how *The Garden*, in spite of Aidinoff's own opinion that it is "not a feminist book", can be read as having a feminist agenda for the way it revises the gender roles prescribed by Genesis 1-3 and draws on other myths and histories to give us an alternative portrayal of Eve (Aidinoff 403). It is a portrayal that undermines the legitimacy of the patriarchal ideology that sees women as secondary, subordinate and sinful, and that, true to Aidinoff's claim, offers us a vision of the Eve we may have seen "if the Bible had been composed by a less patriarchal society" (Aidinoff 403). I would consequently like to appropriate some of Ostriker's theory and observe that as Eve, a "familiar figure from male tradition emerge[s] altered", Aidinoff "explicitly challenge[s] the meaning attributed" to the particular biblical 'myth' in which she originally features; as a result the novel becomes a transforming alternative to the original Genesis account (*Stealing the Language* 215). If we consider how this alternative version of Genesis both reverses gender roles and rescues Eve from patriarchal history and thinking, I think it is fitting to close our discussion of *The Garden* concluding that while Aidinoff "may keep the name", she "changes the game" – and that this is "where revisionist mythology comes in" (Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 215).

Having discussed Aidinoff's less controversial revision of the Genesis narrative, we can now turn our attention to Ann Chamberlin's *Leaving Eden*, a novel that, as stated earlier, offers a contentious rewrite of a completely different aspect of the biblical creation account. As we will show, this novel revises what is perceived to be 'the beginning', and as we consider the methods by which it transcends and transforms the familiar story of human origin and the male deity responsible for it, we will consider how *Leaving Eden* engages in revisionist mythmaking that is both similar to and yet at the same time different from that of *The Garden*.

Ann Chamberlin's *Leaving Eden* as an Alternative Version of 'The Beginning'

In the above section we considered the revision of Eve as a secondary, subordinate and sinful woman. In this section we are less concerned with the gender roles prescribed by the Genesis account than we are with the gender of the creator himself. Accordingly we turn our attention to that aspect of the story as we consider the very first words of the phallogentric biblical text as found in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created" (Gen. 1.1). It could not be more simply put: according to the Bible the divine creator who starts it all is a masculine deity without female counterpart or companion.⁹

It is this often ignored and yet problematic aspect of the Genesis narrative¹⁰ which I suggest Chamberlin revises in *Leaving Eden*, conforming to a tendency that Ostriker identifies in the revisionist work of modern women poets who attempt to

retrieve, from our myth of a dominating abstract father god who creates the universe *ab nihilo*, the figure on which (according to historians of early religion) that god was originally based – the female creatrix. (*Stealing the Language* 219)

This is not Chamberlin's only revision, but I would like to suggest that it is the overarching revision that drives all others. To this end we may observe that in her version of the story, Chamberlin reaches back to a time before the creation account we find in Genesis and portrays the familiar tale of Adam, Eve and the biblical God not as the beginning, but rather as a masculinist *coup d'état* against Mother Nature and her divine laws. Consequently, although *Leaving Eden* is set in a valley called Eden and features a sacred tree, a serpent and characters named Adam and Eve, like the

⁹ I have come across some modern readings which suggest that whereas "God" the creator who speaks the commands is in fact masculine, the "the spirit of God" which hovers over creation is his female counterpart – Sophia/Wisdom. Such readings are based on verses in Proverbs 8 in which Wisdom asserts that She is "[God's] first creation" (22) and that "when God set the Heavens in place – [She] was there" (27). In spite of positive effect such readings might have however, they remain isolated to the ivory tower of academia and the average man or women on the street – who remains for the most part unaware of Wisdom literature- imagines a sole creator who is masculine.

¹⁰ As was highlighted in Chapter 1, we do find many studies that problematise the image of an exclusively male God and the masculine language used to describe 'Him' – the most famous of which is probably Rosemary Radford Reuther's *Sexism and God-talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*. However in all the feminist critiques of the Genesis narrative I have studied, I have not once seen a reference to this aspect of the tale- which if truth be told is where the masculine image of God 'begins'.

biblical original, the tale that is spun around some of the most famous phrases from scripture and mythology, tells an altogether different story of the beginning.

Part of the novel's brilliance lies in the many intertextual references to other myths, theories and histories – all of which offer alternative visions of the beginning and in so doing question and undermine the legitimacy of the biblical account. In this sense the novel is a goldmine waiting to be discovered by the discerning critic and I hope to work with it in more detail in the future. This study will, however, focus solely on two of the novel's more overarching revisions of the original tale: firstly, that it presents Eden as that which existed *before* the biblical beginning and secondly, that it presents 'the fall' of mankind as that which brought about the demise of this original Eden. This discussion that follows will look at the way Chamberlin takes these two basic features of the familiar tale and employs them to altered ends.

The Original Eden

One of the most striking revisions in Chamberlain's *Leaving Eden* is that the tale is set in a time *before* the beginning documented in Genesis. In so doing, Chamberlin transforms both Eden and the characters in it. While the novel tells the story of two characters named Adam and Eve (amongst others), in this version of the tale Adam and Eve are not the progenitors of the human race, but rather the as yet uncoupled members of a tribe of pre-historic, and for that matter pre-Genesis, hunter-gatherers. Furthermore, while the story is set in a place called "Eden" (as in the biblical original), this Eden is not a garden at all, but rather a fertile Valley and the home base from which the clan in question moves every fall (Chamberlin 48). It is the way in which Chamberlin portrays this Eden, completely renovating the biblical original, which is of particular interest with regard to the novel's role as transformative alternative to the original myth.

Playing on the words of Genesis, Chamberlin's "Eden" is described as meaning "delight" in an "ancient tongue" and is portrayed as a "place of purity" and "changelessness" (48). As we soon learn, this pure paradise is a well-balanced ecosystem in which the resident clan, rather than displaying the "dominion" over creation promised in Genesis, merely coexists in harmony with nature (Gen. 1. 28).¹¹ As a result the tribe maintains an ecologically sustainable existence, taking

¹¹ Genesis 1:28 – Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth".

from nature's bounty "but never very much" and "never enough to use [her] up" (Chamberlin 117). As Monaghan observes, *Leaving Eden* "recreat[es] a world in which humanity and nature live in harmony" (166). In line with such sustainability, we also see the functioning of an animistic belief system: instead of conforming to the tendency in Genesis to master and "subdue" nature, the tribe regards earth and its creatures as equals deserving mutual respect (Gen. 1. 28). Such animism, for instance, is displayed when Na'amah, the narrator, observes that clan members must never show "disrespect" to nature because "[their] mothers [had] taught [them] that Earth's creatures hold ancient wisdom and the secrets of eternally renewing life in the movement of their lives' dances" (Chamberlin 52).

This eco-friendly and animistic existence goes hand in hand with a belief in the supremacy of the "Great Mother's cycle", evidence of an earth- and mother-centered system of belief that recognizes the life-sustaining and renewing power of a divine "Earth Mother" who brings both life and death in ever-revolving sequence (Chamberlin 54, 135). The constant acknowledgement of this "Earth Mother" – who is also referred to *inter alia* as "Mother Earth", "Mother Lilith", "Mother of us all" and the "Great Mother" – highlights the tribe's belief in a primordial life-giving Goddess embodied in Nature or the "Earth... Herself" (Chamberlin 37, 18, 32, 39, 126).¹²

Chamberlin's recreated Eden is therefore not only a place of ecological sustainability and harmony, but also a place where, in spite of the many references to other "gods" and "spirits", the overarching manifestation of the divine is the feminine earth mother personified as "Lilith"- "a force of nature,

¹² Interestingly, one might note the reoccurrence of the mythical figure Lilith we saw introduced in discussion of *The Garden*. However, unlike in *The Garden*, which reaches back only to the Hebraic tradition's tendencies to portray Lilith as Adam's first wife- a trend we will also see continued in *Leaving Eden*- the novel furthermore incorporates even older visions of Lilith as form of mother goddess. For, as Barbara Walker observes in *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, the portrayal of Lilith as Adam's wife is merely "a relic of an early rabbinic attempt to assimilate the Sumero-Babylonian Goddess Belit-ili... to Jewish mythology" (451). It is this 'older' Lilith then, Belit-ili, which is documented in *Ancient Goddesses* as having been considered one of the Mesopotamian "mother-goddess" (Goodison and Morris 77). Consequently we can see how Chamberlin delves into history and myth older than Genesis to flesh out her revision. It might, however, also be interesting to note that the figure of Lilith has become somewhat of a liberatory symbol for the Women's Movement. Her historical metamorphosis from goddess to first wife to demon has been seen as symbolic of women's systematic degradation and in this sense the re-conceptualization or 'rise' of Lilith represents women's return to power, independence and equality. Based on such a common vision of Lilith as a feminist symbol, there might be more to Chamberlin's decision to name her 'original' Goddess Lilith than originally meet the eye. For more information on Lilith as a feminist symbol, see "Lilith's Fire" by Deborah Grenn and "The Coming of Lilith" by Judith Plaskow.

eternal and divine” (Chamberlin 48, 28, 45, 29). As will become apparent, it is this Eden which is portrayed as being destroyed by the advent of the belief in a patriarchal male God. However, before considering the portrayal of this ‘fall from grace’, I would first like to consider the implications of portraying Eden as a space of natural balance and goddess worship.

What is interesting about this particular aspect of Chamberlin’s revision of the Eden myth is that it plays on the idea that a Mother Goddess was “universally worshipped” in pre-patriarchal and prehistoric times, thereby aligning itself with theories which suggest that Goddess worship was the “original religion of humanity” (Reuther 2, 21). In this sense, Chamberlin’s writing is reminiscent of the work of the widely recognized and controversial archeologist and cultural historian, Marija Gimbutas – whose theories (according to Rosemary Radford Reuther) tell of

a time before patriarchy ... when humans lived together peacefully and were in harmony with nature, a time when both men and women revered the female as the immanent power of renewal in nature that carried life through creation, growth, decline, death, and renewal of life. (Reuther 21)

Gimbutas’ work, despite many disclaimers, has played a major role in what Reuther refers to as the “Goddess quest” engaged in by “Goddess feminists” eager for proof of “prehistoric matriarchal or matricentric societies” (6, 21). As she points out, such theories provide “the basis for a modern counter-cultural identity that is very powerful for those who seek such an alternative”:

It allows [people] to imagine a peaceful, matricentric, and ecologically sustainable culture as their own “original culture” and to disown the patterns of patriarchy, violence and domination that have characterized western culture ... By imagining a time – indeed a primeval time – before this culture of violence and domination, one can imagine a time after it, a day when [people] can reclaim their original and more authentic mothering, peaceful, ecologically sustainable cultural selves. (22)

Reuther is of course speaking here of theories of origin such as Gimbutas’, yet I suggest that the same culture-transforming potential can be found in works of fiction like *Leaving Eden* that give readers an alternative view of the beginning. Much like the utopian fiction we discussed in the previous chapter, Chamberlin’s portrayal of the original Eden allows readers to imagine a matricentric and goddess-centered culture as the original culture. This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it allows readers to imagine a time ‘before’ patriarchy and is therefore transformative in the sense that it undermines patriarchal culture’s claim to primacy and naturalness. Secondly, through

the portrayal of the female as the original life-giving and life-sustaining deity, the tale also undermines the legitimacy of an exclusively male deity as sole creator of the universe and in effect “challenges traditional Christian theology” (Steinberg and Zaleski 57-58). In both these instances, Chamberlin’s revision destabilizes what we might regard as two of the “pillars sustaining phallogocentric high culture” (Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 215). Furthermore, it is by portraying the original Eden as a space of ecological awareness and gender equality, that Chamberlin allows readers to imagine what might have pre-existed Adam and his male God, and what was lost to history when ‘their’ phallogocentric version of the beginning became the only one. This view is supported by a reader who in an Amazon review suggests that *Leaving Eden* is a “what if book” that “gives you a different perspective of how things could have been” (“Busy Mom”).

Having established the significance of Chamberlin’s portrayal of Eden, I would like to turn to her next major revision of the original tale, namely her approach to the idea of ‘the fall’ of humanity. As previously mentioned, *Leaving Eden* does not portray the fall as an act of disobedience to a male God. Rather, in relation to a paradise which centres on nature and mother, the fall is seen as a denial of that mother in favour of a newfound patriarchal male god. It is in this usurping god’s message of a “new creation” and “new way [that] is coming” that we can then locate references to the Genesis account of creation (Chamberlin 143). By considering how Chamberlin sets up this ‘fall’, we can see how such a portrayal not only negatively reflects on it, but also undermines, destabilises and challenges the legitimacy of the very Genesis account it echoes.

The Fall of Man

In order to achieve the above-mentioned effect and transform our vision of the fall, Chamberlin sketches Adam himself as the first evil to enter *Leaving Eden*’s paradise and as the catalyst that sets the fall in motion. Portrayed as ‘out of sync’ with the world around him, Adam fails to “*learn submission to the Great Mother’s cycle*” as is expected of every member of the clan. Instead, as an arrogant character who “*lack[s] the humility a single man must hold in the face of the greater good of the clan*”, Adam considers himself “[c]hosen”, “*dream[s] dreams and report[s] them, bragging of every exploit*” (Chamberlin 52). It is these dreams - dreams that present a “*new vision of the world*” – which set in motion what Na’amah describes as a “*disruption in [Eden’s] balance*” (Chamberlin 55).

This portrayal of Adam as the catalyst of the fall, is of course in itself already a major revision of the original narrative which places the blame on Eve, the first woman, and on the serpent, which ironically “was originally identified with the Great Goddess herself” (Walker 903). Consequently, whereas the Bible depicts the fall as very much a result of a ‘feminine’ evil, Chamberlin reverses this and places the blame on a man who brings with him a masculine belief system. To this end, we see that Adam’s message, the vision he receives in his dreams and which “*runs against all [the clan has] ever known*”, refers to a masculine bull and storm god, both of which are very prominent symbols of masculine power and divinity;¹³ it also displays a strong resemblance to the Genesis creation account (Chamberlin 55):

In his vision, [the miracle of creation] had taken but six days, from the splitting of the great original monster of formlessness into sky above and earth below, to the creation of Adam himself. And he saw every animal given for his use ... A great spirit, taking the form of a bull or sometimes a mountain, told Adam to name all these beasts according to his own names ... Adam felt that some god had given him leave to speak to the rest of creation as others would only speak to infants whose bottoms they must still wipe. (Chamberlin 52)

The world was created in six days. The Bull of Heaven rested his harrowing horns on the seventh. And set Adam in the world with no other purpose but to tend the place. And subdue it. (Chamberlin 54)

It is in these versions of Adam’s vision that we pick up some of the key concepts and phrases from the creation account found in Genesis 1-3. These include references to the original “formlessness” of the world, to a male creator that creates the world in “six days” and rests on the “seventh”, to a command to “name all ... beasts”, and finally to a prerogative to “tend” creation. Thus, Adam’s vision of a new creation that threatens the old ways is clearly linked to the version of the beginning found in Genesis. It is, however, not until the very end of the tale, when Adam finally speaks the following words, that Chamberlin literally collapses Adam’s vision of what is to come into the very creation account she bases it on:

¹³ We see for instance that in *The Storm God in the Ancient Near East*, Alberto Green notes that “the male principle” is often represented “in the symbolic form of the bull” (115). Walker supports such an argument when she points out that “nearly every god of the ancient world was incarnate sooner or later in a bull” (125). This image is then further related to an “[an] anthropomorphic Storm-god” since Green suggests that it is this bull which is in the religions of the Ancient Near East regularly portrayed as the Storm-god’s “attendant”(115). Significantly Green also suggests that such a Storm-god represents one of the most potent and prominent manifestations of divinity as experienced by early man, and this forms “the mythical foundation of the modern conception of God” (1). It becomes obvious that Chamberlin is drawing on this very masculine concept of divinity in her portrayal of Adam’s God as the “Bull of Heaven” manifested in a storm.

God...In the cool of the day... The beginning... new... The voice of God... Keep the garden and dress it...Dominion over all creation... (Chamberlin 229; ellipses in original)¹⁴

At this point it is interesting to note that that cultural and anthropological studies of history have argued that “at some point in time... the male (Sky) god gained power over the female (Earth) goddess” and “patriarchal-structured cultures replaced the partnership cultures” (McDonald 173). Such arguments of conquest by a male sky God, bringing a patriarchal system of belief, bears an uncanny resemblance to plot structure of *Leaving Eden* in general, but also in particular to the moment when Adam’s “Bull of Heaven” – whom he “[sees]” manifested “in the storm” – sets fire to the “sacred Fig”, associated with both the Mother-Goddess and the feminine (Chamberlin 54, 134, 132).¹⁵ Given this obvious intertextuality, we can argue that the novel asks us to associate this historical rise of male divinity, envisioned as a kind of storm or sky god, with the patriarchal version of the beginning we find in Genesis. Through Chamberlin’s portrayal of Adam’s visions, she draws a direct link between the fall of the original goddess-worshiping civilization (and therefore of the feminine and maternal as recognized and revered power) and the rise of Christianity and Judaism’s male-centered religion, as represented by Genesis.

In support of this argument, we see that Adam himself recognizes the burning of the “Lilith Tree” as a “cleansing” and “a sign from his God” that “a new way is coming”, “ a way where men need no longer hunt aurochs to see their seed flourish, innumerable as the stars” (Chamberlin 133, 134, 143).¹⁶ Just as Adam envisions, the burning of the tree also acts as a kind of foreshadowing in the

¹⁴ Allowing for the difference in translations, almost the exact same phrases can be found in Genesis: “God walking in the Garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8); “In the Beginning” (Genesis 1:1); “The Lord God called ... And [Adam] said: I heard Your voice” (Genesis 3:9); “God...put [man] in the garden ... to tend and keep it” (Genesis 2:15); “Let them have dominion... over all the earth” (Genesis 1:26).

¹⁵ The sacred Fig, which is incidentally also linked to the Tree of Knowledge through various references, is throughout the text considered as sacred to the Goddess. It is for instance referred to as “our Lilith Tree” – directly linking it to the Goddess – while the tale of its origins also sees it as originally planted by the Goddess Lilith herself (Chamberlin 133, 39). Furthermore, the tree is linked to the feminine and is described as “a woman’s place” and associated with the female rites of womanhood (Chamberlin 46). All women go “to the Tree” during their menses, making it a space in which they honor what is considered to be the “Mother-power... within them”; in so doing they celebrate not only their own life-giving power but also that of the Goddess within this space (Chamberlin 93).

¹⁶ Adam’s description of the “new way” as an era in which men no longer need to hunt aurochs, is also a signal of the patriarchal thinking that will mark the reign of Adam’s God. Previously, under the law of the Mother, hunting the rare and nearly extinct

text, symbolic of what is to come – the end of a divine feminine power as well as unity with nature. Accordingly, near the end of the novel, Na'amah associates Adam's visions of a new world with a fall from a state of divine harmony. She raises this concern when she ponders that Adam has "left [paradise] behind" (216):

For if a beginning is bred, in that instant so also is an end. And in his sudden, new creation, Adam had broken apart what had been until then a spiral, a circle. By the brute force of his own will, he had stretched the arc taut and long, made a line. He had shoved a great stone off its balance at a cliff's edge. Now nothing could stop its fall. (Chamberlin 230)

It is in the final imagery of a "fall" that "nothing can stop", brought about by Adam, that we return to our earlier suggestion that Chamberlin represents Adam as the catalyst of the fall and depicts his visions of a patriarchal male deity as the first evil to enter her matricentric and ecologically sustainable Eden. However, in spite of the fact that this change is portrayed as unstoppable, we can also note that the very narrative in which Adam's version of the beginning rises to supremacy, undermines its legitimacy from the very start.

To understand this, we need to consider how Adam's visions are presented as the arrogant imaginings of a selfish man. One notices how, at the very beginning of the novel, the tribeswomen mock Adam for "imagin[ing]" himself to be "the only man in the world" and for "think[ing]" that "the gods came down and breathed a special creation for him" (Chamberlin 13, 17).¹⁷ They respond to his stories with "loud laughter" and "dismissive waves" as well as flippant comments to "[l]et Adam puff himself up large as a beasts bladder" and "think what he wants" (Chamberlin 13, 24). In contrast to these lofty imaginings, we also see one of the women remark that in spite of what he might believe, "Adam entered the world like anybody else", namely through the "mountain passes formed of a woman's nether side" (Chamberlin 19). It is this, the ordinariness of Adam's origin, as witnessed by the rest of the clan, which undermines any of truth value that his accounts of the beginning might possess.

aurochs was the only way whereby men could take more than one wife. Now, in a world where such a law is no longer required, men may take as many wives as they please; the patriarchal practice of polygamy enters the previously egalitarian society.

¹⁷ Again the wording here is very important since the ideas they are mocking him for are the same one's used in the story of the original Adam who is the only man in the world and is created by God's breath.

Just as Na'amah informs us that this the women's "jesting" provides "an amusing twist on the old story of how the world and everything in it came to be", so the novel also puts a "twist" on the story of Genesis (Chamberlin 17). By allowing these characters to speak such familiar phrases in a new context, it undermines their original truth value and sets a scene in which Adam's status as first man, and his tale of a beginning that ignores the mother, seems more like the result of male fantasy than a true version of humanity's origin. Through the subversive power of Chamberlin's imagination, the novel forces its readers to reconsider the intent and legitimacy of a Genesis account that favours man and a male deity at the expense of the (excluded) feminine. Appropriating the words of Ester Fuchs, we might argue that such a rewrite challenges "one of the most powerful sources of male hegemony" and in the process "loosen[s] the myth of male supremacy over our consciousness and imagination" (qtd. in McKinlay 32).

However, as have seen, *Leaving Eden* does not simply undermine the biblical version of 'the beginning'. It also offers us an alternative and transformative view of that same mythical moment. It is by considering how the novel thus transcends the original biblical myth of origins at the same time as it creates a new one, that I would like to once again turn to Ostriker's concept of revisionary mythmaking and her theoretical insights. Ostriker observes that in many of the poems that she reads as revisionary mythmaking, the poet "deconstructs a prior 'myth' or 'story'" at the same time as she "constructs a new one which includes, instead of excluding herself" (Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 212). If in this instance we read "herself" as not necessarily a reference to the individual writer, but rather as a generic reference to the feminine or simply 'woman', then we may apply such thinking to Chamberlin's *Leaving Eden*. As we have suggested, Chamberlin "deconstructs" and undermines the phallogocentric biblical myth of a male God and 'his' beginning while at the same time offering us a matricentric myth as its replacement. In so doing she writes the feminine – and so 'herself' – back into history as the original manifestation of the divine. As such, she fulfils the requirements of revisionist mythmaking by employing the story to altered ends, revising the meaning of female as non-divine and therefore 'less than', and ultimately offering us a redefinition of women and culture.

In this chapter we have considered how two very different novels, both of which rewrite the familiar tale of creation found in Genesis 1-3, engage in revisionist mythmaking as they "[appropriate] the tale for altered ends", fill the "old vessel" with "new wine" and ultimately create new stories to offer readers new visions of genesis, gender and women's 'place' in both history and

culture (Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 212-213). We have seen how such revisionist tales can act as liberating and transforming alternatives to the original, effectively freeing women from an inherently patriarchal and androcentric ideology.

We have also explored how these tales, through their revisionist strategies, undermine and subvert the originals, questioning the infallibility of the biblical text. One might suggest that such revisionist mythmaking aligns itself with the feminist biblical critique that “[dismisses] the bible as an ancient patriarchal text” and searches instead for “more positive sources for feminist theology (Japinga 40; Reuther 4). However, I would like to suggest that this is not always the case and that such revisionary mythmaking, instead of destroying and nullifying scripture, can have a revitalizing effect on it. These female authors have, after all, chosen not to reject and ignore these stories, but instead to re-imagine them. Consequently, as we will show in the next chapter, these revisions can help us re-imagine the patriarchal tendencies of the Christian religion in much the same way as the writers have re-imagined the stories themselves.

4

Reclaiming the Sacred: From Exclusive Theology to Inclusive Theology

What will happen when the spiritual imagination of women,
women who call themselves Jews or Christians, pagans or
atheists, witches or worshippers of the Great Goddess,
is released into language and into history?
-Alycia Ostriker¹

Our sweet Sophia, we are women in your image:
With nectar between our thighs, we invite a lover, we birth a child;
With our warm body fluids, we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations.
-Feminist prayer²

As was pointed out in Chapter One, western religious practice and theology has been marked by phallogocentric tendencies that limit women's participation in what we might term the sacred. Faced by a masculine god, a male clergy and a theology almost exclusively generated by men, women have been either excluded from or sidelined by visions of a sacred that is neither like them nor available to them unless mediated by men. In comparison with such limiting views of divinity and sacred practice, revisionist novels like *The Red Tent*, which not only present readers with images of a Divine Feminine, but also with priestesses, female celebrants and various sacred rites in which women actively feature, are striking in their dissimilarity. It was this very aspect of *The Red Tent* that had initially held and continues to hold the most appeal for me. Although the scope of my study has been broadened to include other instances of revision, I return to this fascinating topic in this chapter, and consider how novels like *The Red Tent*, *The Moon under Her Feet*, *Leaving Eden* and *Wisdom's Daughter* revise the idea of the sacred.

In line with such an intention, it is useful to consider Veronica Brady's reviews of Elaine Lindsay's *Rewriting God: Spirituality in Contemporary Australian Women's Fiction* and Frances Devlin-

¹ *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, page 30.

² qtd. in Carol Christ's *She Who Changes: Re-imagining the Divine in the World*, page 9.

Glass and Lyn McCredan's *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred: Creative Suspicions*. Brady observes that "both books have a ... broadly theological and intellectual purpose", that seeks "to explore the ways in which a rewriting and a re-reading of the idea of divinity may liberate women, and enlarge the scope of our understanding of reality" (274). With this in mind, I hope to show how the selected novels have not only revised the idea of divinity in itself, but also the broader concept of the sacred – managing in the process to "claim for women territory from which they have been [previously] excluded" (Brady 274). In order to consider how women and the feminine are moved to the very centre of what is considered sacred, this chapter will explore imagery of Goddesses, participants and specifically also the controversial reproductive female body. It will show how these novels reverse and challenge images of the divine as well as women's exclusion from it, and perhaps, in the process, "produce visions of female spirituality that are politically challenging to patriarchal values and spiritually empowering for women themselves" (Walton 89).

Alternative Visions of Divinity: From God to Goddess

Reading the Bible as a religious text, it is, and always will be, first and foremost the story of God, a deity that is for the most part conceptualised as predominantly male. This being the case, the transformation of the idea of the divine can be regarded as the most significant and potentially blasphemous revisionist strategy employed in this specific selection of novels as they present the reader with visions of divinity that destabilise and undermine the masculine norm. These (re)visions centre on the female deities or Goddesses³ that freely roam the pages of these tales and that stand in stark contrast to the almost exclusively masculine divine recognised in Judaism and Christianity.

As I pointed out in the Introduction, it was this very same motif of a Divine Feminine⁴, manifested in the shape of the controversial and biblically reviled Goddess-figure, that underpinned my original criteria for revisionist fiction and that resulted in the selection of these particular novels, rather than

³ Although some of the writers and critics I refer to in this chapter choose not to capitalise the term 'Goddess', I have decided to follow the example of those that do. In this sense I am also trying to make a deliberate point with regards to importance and legitimacy: I feel that the failure to capitalise references to the Divine Feminine perpetuates the established and phallogocentric religious discourse that only recognises the legitimacy of Christianity's male God (which is always capitalised).

⁴ Although I initially conceptualised female or feminine deities as manifestation of what I termed the 'Feminine Divine', I -after much internal debate- decided to follow in the footsteps of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Carol Christ who write about the 'Divine Feminine' - rather than, for instance, Deborah Grenn who terms it the 'Sacred Feminine'. Because there is no accepted or right term for this un-traditional concept, except of course the word 'goddess' which, as Sue Monk Kidd explains, has "unfairly been associated with things base and sordid", I had to simply make a decision in this regard.

other biblical ‘rewrites’. Five of the six novels I have identified as revisionist are therefore characterized by imagery of Goddesses that act as both legitimate manifestations of the divine and as awe-inspiring entities central to the dynamics of the story being told. With the exception *The Garden*, which includes the Divine Feminine in a much less obvious manner⁵, we can identify the Ancient Mother who has many names in *The Wild Girl*, the Earth-Goddess Lilith in *Leaving Eden*, the many-faceted Queen of Heaven in *The Moon under her Feet*, different Goddesses, such as Illat, Hippona and Asherah in *Wisdom’s Daughter*, and finally a collection of female deities as diverse as the women who call on them in *The Red Tent*. Although three of these novels ‘draw’ on the same ancient Goddesses, all six represent readers with varied and carefully considered images of the Divine Feminine that has been repressed and condemned in the Bible and Christian theology.

It is this ‘different’ portrayal of the divine as feminine or female that is vital to a revisionary process that provides readers with new models of divinity. In order to explore the validity of this claim, it will be useful to investigate how *The Red Tent* and to a lesser extent *The Moon under Her Feet* can be said to have retrieved and re-imagined the divine as feminine. I hope to show that these texts are popular and accessible embodiments of the “new” and “different story” of divinity that Deborah Grenn calls for in her article on transformative theological practice— a story that is potentially “empowering for women” through the manner in which it “reclaim[s] the Sacred Feminine through new writings and literary responses to male-centred canonical texts” (36-37, 45).

One of the first things to note about Diamant’s *The Red Tent* is that it literally overflows with images of the Divine Feminine. Throughout the text, we find references to Goddesses and the women (and sometimes also the men) who worship and invoke them. Zilpha, for instance, as the most devout of the female characters, worships “the Queen of Heaven” but also tells “stories about Ninhursag, the great mother” and considers herself to be the “the daughter of Asherah the sister-Siduri who counsels women” (Diamant 15). Rachel also calls on “Asherah” when she “prostrate[s] herself before the wide-mouthed grinning goddess” asking for a child, but at the same time she is portrayed as mourning her barrenness under the “acacia tree, sacred to Innana” (66). This same Innana is praised by the irreligious Leah when she calls her the “great mother” and credits her with being a “fierce warrior”, “Death’s bridesmaid”, “the centre of pleasure” and the “patron of rain” –

⁵ In this text the Divine Feminine is present not in the form of a Goddess, but in the form of the Serpent who more than once refers to itself as “Wisdom”, the Divine Feminine of the Jewish tradition, and also espouses an ecological awareness resembling that of Goddess-teachings (Aidinoff 195).

roles that are both traditionally feminine and masculine (187). We can also note the name of Anath, who is called upon when Rachel becomes a successful midwife – a moment that her sisters celebrate by “pour[ing] out salt and wine” as a libation to “Anath, the healer” (57). Innana, Asherah, Anath, Ninhurshag and the Queen of Heaven – these are just some of the Ancient Near Eastern Goddesses vital to the plot of *The Red Tent*.

In light of such diversity, Sandra Hack Polanski seems to have a valid point when she observes in her readers’ guide that the novel “invokes” Goddesses “as the creators, sustainers, and destroyers of human life ... in almost dizzying variety” (51). *The Red Tent* definitely depicts a plethora of female deities, and this can be read as overwhelming or “dizzying” because these different Goddesses are invoked randomly and interchangeably. With the exception of one or two longer tales, the novel furthermore provides only the occasional short epithet or brief description to alert the reader to the different roles of each of these Goddesses as they are invoked. The impression created is that the author is hardly concerned to distinguish between them or to provide readers untrained in Ancient Near Eastern history and myth with a sensible pantheon or family tree of some sort to help them navigate this variety of Goddesses. This suggests that rather than aiming to provide readers with a lesson in cultural history, painstakingly educating them as to the functions and personalities of the individual Goddesses, *The Red Tent* instead offers a collection of different (but equally inspiring) female deities as potential manifestations of divinity. In saying this I am reminded of a moment in *Wisdom’s Daughter* when the Israelite princess Baalit describes her positive experience of the female deities housed in some of Jerusalem’s pagan temples:

Goddesses. Goddesses slim as the crescent moon shining in their curled hair. Goddesses lush and fertile as ripe pomegranates. Goddesses fierce and strong as the great cats fawning at their feet. (Edgehill 117)

It is these varied images of Goddesses, each embodying a different form of beauty and power, that reflects the manner in which *The Red Tent* displays diverse manifestations of the Divine Feminine. Such multiplicity is, therefore, the first way in which *The Red Tent* can be said to present the different story of divinity that Grenn calls for. Having re-imagined the divine as female, Diamant offers readers a story of that alternative divine as it is manifested in the form of these various Goddesses. As is the case with the unnamed and undefined “Queen of Heaven”, whom Zilpah “love[s] in every shape and name”, the novel seems to be suggesting that, in contrast to predominantly masculine norm or ‘the story’ of male divinity told in traditional and canonical

sacred texts, divinity might take many forms – some of which might be female (and yet not necessarily always ‘feminine’ in the traditional sense of the word).

In order to further explore this idea of a different story of divinity, as presented in *The Red Tent*, we should consider how Diamant draws on history to reclaim the Divine Feminine from the past. As pointed out above, the names of the Goddesses worshipped in *The Red Tent* are drawn from the pantheons of the Ancient Near Eastern religions. Both Asherah, the mother-Goddess of Ugarit, and Anat, a war Goddess who “combin[es] the traits of the alluring young woman and the warrior” are from the Canaanite pantheon, while the mother-Goddess Ninurshag and the Goddess Innana, who is worshipped as the morning star, derive from the Sumerian pantheon (Frymer Kensky, *In the Wake* 156, 86). Such a selection of Goddesses is significant because it draws readers’ attention to the existence of previously flourishing female deities worshipped before the onset of monotheism. Thus Diamant offers readers an authentic female alternative to the dominant visions of male divinity found in the Bible.

This strategy of cultural retrieval aligns Diamant with the popular feminist tendency to recover what Sue Monk Kidd calls the “lost history of the ancient Goddess” (142). According to Rosemary Radford Reuther, this is one of the strategies pursued by feminists who are interested in overcoming the patriarchal tendencies of religion but have “despaired of any effort to reinterpret established religious systems shaped by millennia of patriarchy” (307). Such women therefore “reach back to an earlier time before the rise of patriarchy for some original feminist alternative” which is “repristinated”(sic) by “reclaiming goddesses from the ancient Near East” (Reuther 307). Very importantly, however, Reuther cautions that because of historical and archaeological difficulties and inconsistencies, such an endeavour cannot offer a “ready-made feminist spirituality that we can lay hold of literally and reproclaim” as the original and “old-time religion”. She does, however, concede that it offers possibilities for “rich creativity” through “reinterpretations and new mythmaking” (Reuther 307). Although the previous chapter also dealt with the concept of ‘mythmaking’, I suggest that in this context mythmaking can refer to the idea of a new story of divinity as well as a new story regarding who and what is sacred – as the next section of this chapter will explore. First, however, I would like to discuss one more aspect of Diamant’s imagined Divine Feminine – namely the way in which she implicitly highlights an often-ignored aspect of Jewish and (by association, Christian) history.

Further research shows that the Goddesses named by Diamant in her novel, are widely recognised by scholars as having been worshipped not only by the ancient Sumerians, Akkadians and Canaanites, but also by the early Israelites, from the time of their arrival in Canaan up to about 500 years before the birth of Christ. In contrast to the common perception that “[the Hebrews] worshipped one god, male and transcendent, and rejected the validity of all other gods” and goddesses, scholars like Karel van der Toorn argue that “the [biblical, epigraphic and archaeological] evidence” for what can be defined as an “early Israelite cult of Goddesses” worshipped as “consorts of Yahweh” is very strong (Reuther 73; 96). These apparent “Hebrew Goddess[es]” include Asherah, Anat and the problematic Queen of Heaven – a mysteriously unnamed Goddess who is identified by different scholars as either the above-mentioned Anat, or as Ninurshag, or as the morning star, Innana, whose very name translates as “lady of Heaven” (Patai 34-36; van der Toorn 83, 86; Frymer-Kensky, qtd. in Wright 128; Westenholz 73). Since it is these same Goddesses that are worshipped by the women of *The Red Tent*, Diamant’s inclusion of these specific Goddesses seems intended to draw readers’ attention to the existence of female deities that not only pre-dated but also co-existed with Christianity and Judaism’s male, monotheistic God.

As *The Red Tent* is set in the time of the patriarchs, when the original covenant between man and his male god came into existence,⁶ the Goddesses worshipped in the tale might simply be read as evidence of a pre-Yahwistic cult; one that would have been eradicated at that biblical moment when Jacob called upon his household to “purify” themselves and “put away the foreign gods that are among [them] (Gen. 35.2). However, very significantly, in *The Red Tent*, Jacob is portrayed as only destroying the teraphim that Rachel has stolen from her father: the text informs us that “he ha[s] no quarrel with... [his wives’] goddesses” as long as they also “fulfil their obligations to him and to his god” (Diamant 208). Thus, in Diamant’s novel Goddess worship continues even after this pivotal moment and peacefully co-exists with the God of the patriarchs. This aspect of her story therefore echoes scholastic theory that the later Goddess cults condemned by biblical prophets were not in fact reflections of Israel’s “fall into apostasy, with the people defecting to other religious cults foreign to Yahwism” (as is popularly argued), but were rather a manifestation of the ongoing “plural elements” of an earlier and more ‘tolerant’ Yahwism (Reuther 74). As Raphael Patai suggests, “from the arrival of the Israelite tribes in Canaan... down to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar”, the Hebrews, as he defines them, would have worshipped Goddesses, along

⁶ A time that presumably marks the beginning of biblical monotheism.

with various other gods, “in most places and times” – a practice that would have only declined “intermittently” as the “prophetic demand for the worship of Yahweh as the one and only god” intensified and was “heeded by the people and their leaders” (34).

It is this same suppressed or lost history of ancient Hebrew Goddesses that Kinstler draws on in *The Moon under her Feet*. The novel defines the “the Goddess” central to its plot as “the Morning Star” and “The Queen of Heaven” as well as “Inanna-Ishtar-Ashera-Isis” –combining the familiar titles with Akkadian and Egyptian ones (Kinstler 1-5, 26). The link is however most obvious when the novel locates this ‘collective’ Goddess in “her rightful place in the Temple” with “Jehovah as her bridegroom and consort”, as has been the case “since the time of Solomon” (Kinstler 85)⁷.

Kinstler’s employment of the imagery of a Hebrew Goddess cult is much more explicit than is the case with Diamant, and, interestingly, such imagery is made all the more significant by the fact that her novel provides extensive notes and a bibliography. This allows her to ground her fiction in fact as she quotes historical record and research to back up her revisionist fiction.

Both Kinstler’s and Diamant’s novels therefore draw on the suppressed Goddess heritage of Christianity and Judaism to give us images of a Divine Feminine. This is significant because many people are completely unaware that such figures ever existed. We may note, for instance, that one enraged Amazon-reviewer, upset by Kinstler’s “blasphemous suppositions”, states that “Goddess-worship was non-existent in Israel” (“Ann”). “Ann” from Florida, like many others who share her beliefs, has no idea how ill-informed she is. Despite the many attempts by prophets to eradicate such worship, Goddess worship did exist, and at times even flourished, in Israel. As Patai Points out, incarnations of the Divine Feminine exercised an “extraordinary hold ... over the people of Israel” who seemed to have a “psychological need for a mother-goddess” to counter-balance Yahweh as his necessary “female counterpart” (Patai 46, 43). The fact that both novels alert us to the existence of such a legitimate form of the Divine Feminine, long worshipped alongside the masculine God of the Bible, is important for more than the obvious reason. Although it serves to correct the common misunderstanding that no such a Divine Feminine ever existed or was widely

⁷ This statement in itself is significant because, as Patai argues, it was “King Solomon [who] introduce[d] [goddess] worship into his capital city of Jerusalem” as part of the official religion and that “out of the 360 years that Solomon’s temple complex lasted in Jerusalem... Asherah ... had been worshipped there for 240 as Jehovah’s bride and sister with her wooden image publicly displayed” (Patai 39; Graves, qtd. in Kinstler 308).

and popularly worshipped as part of official religion, it also does something more: it offers western women an authentic alternative from within their own religious history, together with the realisation that their modern need for a Divine Feminine is not so modern after all.

Having thus considered how these novels facilitate visions of the divine as feminine, I would like turn my attention to the possibilities that these alternative myths or stories of divinity might hold for women. If, as Grenn argues, the “suppression of the Sacred Feminine in [canonical and traditional texts] has kept women alienated”, not only from visions of themselves as representing the divine, but also, in effect, from their “own ‘original sources’” of “power and spiritual authority”, then the retrieval and re-conception of such a feminine can have a corrective effect (38). In keeping with this argument, I devote the next section of this chapter to a consideration of how – by drawing on the idea of Divine Feminine – these texts are able to claim for women a territory from which they have been previously excluded, as well as facilitate their affirmation and empowerment by transforming them into legitimate participants in and authentic bearers of the sacred.

New Forms of Female Spirituality: From the Margin to the Centre

As we pointed out in the first chapter, one of the most damaging effects of patriarchal God-religion, over and beyond the fact that it portrays divinity as almost exclusively masculine, has been women’s marginalisation from religious practice and authority and their exclusion from the sacred. By challenging normative representations of patriarchy’s Holy Father and the sanctified sons serving him as priests and mediators, these revisionist novels offer us not only images of Goddesses but also images of the *women* who serve them as priestesses, celebrants and initiates – females who participate in every aspect of sacred rites and practices. Thus, in contrast to the peripheral women of western religious practice, the women in these novels are no longer silent or insignificant observers of a religion, but active and valued participants in the divine mysteries. Whether we consider the “the priestesses of Isis-Ashera” in *The Moon under her Feet*, the diviners at *The Red Tent*’s “holy grove in Mamre”, or the dancing, singing celebrants in *Leaving Eden*, the female ‘worshippers’ in these novels are central to religious practice and sacred spaces as both members and leaders (Kinstler 84; Diamant 163; Chamberlin 105).

A particular passage from *Wisdom’s Daughter* captures this move from a space of exclusion to one of inclusion. In it we have the princess Baalit contemplating the worship of Jerusalem’s reigning deity, Yahweh, in contrast to the many Goddesses available in the city’s pagan temples:

How strange; the house of my god was forbidden to me. To all women. Only the outer court was permitted to women. Farther than that they might not go, lest they defile our god's sanctuary.
No wonder women turned instead to the goddesses who welcomed them open-armed, and offered love instead of wrath. No wonder women baked sweet cakes and poured honey wine for the queens of heaven. (Edghill 118)

What the above implies is that the decision to join in the worship of a female deity is preceded by exclusion from the domain of a male deity. In contrast to their relegation to the "outer" edges of a religion and their exclusion from its most sacred spaces, devotees of the Goddess-cult are embraced by the Goddess with "open-arms". The women who participate in such worship are also not marginalised by having their interaction with the divine mediated by men. Instead, they participate in their own sacred rituals as they pour out libations and offer sacrifices to Goddesses, participating in rites which in Yahwistic practice are normally reserved for male celebrants and priests.

The Moon under her Feet also uses images of inclusion to show how female devotees are valued by and accepted into a more official form of the Goddess cult. The tale begins as the protagonist, Mari Anath, together with six other five-year-old girls, is "given to the Goddess" (Kinstler 5). Each is "her own family's most precious offering to the Mother", and the girls are accepted into the "sacred cloister of the College of Virgins" to start their training as priestesses who will serve in the Temple in Jerusalem (Kinstler 9, 11). The mere mention of these little girls as "precious offerings" taken into the "sacred" space of the cloister suggests that the female is valued by and included in the cult of the Goddess. In this sense, the moment of Mari's admission is to "[Goddess'] service" is of particular interest:

Each small girl was like the queen of a great land, for [the High Priestess Anna] took all the time in the world with us. She knelt in turn before each maid, glorious robes flowing, while the people watched in reverent silence. When it was my turn, she gently opened my clammy hands with smooth, jewelled fingers, and clasped them as she spoke, the kindness in her touch like cool water. Her voice was silver bells and angel choirs.

"Do you, Mari Anath, desire with all your heart and soul to serve the Mother as long as you live?"

"I do," my voice quavered...

"Do you promise to follow in her service wherever she shall lead?"

"I do."

She dipped her ringed fingers into the oil that another priestess held for her, and paced them on my head.

"Welcome home, my daughter." (Kinstler 9)

It is significant that the young female novices in this passage are once again valued – this time as royalty– and are each presented as deserving the undivided attention of the High Priestess who welcomes them into the cloister. Furthermore, the way in which Mari’s nervous hands are enclosed by those of the High Priestess in her ceremonial role as the “the Goddess-on-Earth” functions as a visual representation of the act of inclusion into both the circle of both the Goddess and the Priestess (Kinstler 8). In this sense the “smooth, jewelled fingers” of the priestess, the “kindness” of her “gentl[e]” touch and the simile of calming and enveloping “cool water”, all serve to emphasize the positive nature of the experience. One might even go so far as to suggest that when Mari’s closed, “clammy” hands are “opened up” and then enclosed by those of another woman, she moves from defensive isolation to release and finally inclusion into a society of women. The idea of inclusion, however, is most prominent when Mari is anointed – and therefore consecrated or made sacred – and received into the sect of priestesses with the phrase: “Welcome home, my daughter”. This well-chosen ceremonial greeting speaks of inclusion on more than one level. Firstly, the image of welcoming and homecoming suggests acceptance into a sacred space and society where Mari rightly belongs. Secondly, the image of her as “daughter” implies maternal kinship and establishes an intimate bond not only between Mari and the High Priestess who speaks the words, but also the between Mari and the “Mother”-Goddess whom the priestess represents and to whom Mari is swearing allegiance (Kinstler 9).

This relates directly to a passage in *Leaving Eden* – a passage in which female celebrants return from ritualistic seclusion during their “moontime”, all the while dancing with “steps that [are] light, jigging, suggestive” and singing the following song (105):

*We are beautiful and pure
And our power has been renewed
By the Mother’s hand
Welcome us now, welcome the Mother’s daughters.* (Chamberlin 105)

This song is significant for a number of reasons, but it is the closing line – “*Welcome us now, welcome the Mother’s daughters*” – which is relevant to the present discussion as it echoes the words with which Mari Anath is welcomed in *The Moon under her Feet*. The situation here is slightly different, since it is men who are welcoming the women back from celebrations exclusive

to women (and therefore ‘inclusive’ of them), but the last two words carry the same significance as the those in *The Moon under her Feet*. The connotations of “us... the Mother’s daughters” suggest inclusion of a very intimate sort. “Us”, as a collective term, presents the celebrating women as a single unit, joined in recognition of the maternal heritage that they share as “daughters” of a divine “Mother”— a heritage that is therefore embedded in their femaleness. Subsequently, what prevents them from associating with a male deity is exactly that which affirms their centrality and facilitates their association with a female deity. Their likeness, their similarity and their female kinship with the deity they serve is what includes them in the space of the sacred.

Thus we see that these novels – by re-imagining the divine as female– are also able to move women from the periphery of religious practice to the centre: as women, serving a female deity, these characters are not only affirmed and valued, but also allowed to experience inclusion instead of exclusion in their roles as priestesses, celebrants and participants. It is such an emphasis on femaleness and how it facilitates interaction between female deity and female celebrant that then brings me to this chapter’s next thematic concern, namely the female body. In the section that follows I consider the reconceptualisation of such a body as sacred, something that is absolutely central to these novels’ reversal of women’s religious marginalisation.

The Goddess’s Gift: Reclaiming the Female Body as Sacred Space

One of the first things to note with regard to representations of the female body in these novels is that it is very much present: the pages are filled with images of pointing breasts, bulging bellies, birth-giving mothers and menstrual blood. Yet, as a motif, the female body and its biological functions does not conform to the objectifying and abjectifying tendencies of popular media and patriarchal thought. Rather, it is portrayed as something awe-inspiring, powerful and, very importantly, sacrosanct. Consider for instance the singing women in *Leaving Eden*, quoted above, who assert that their dancing, “jigging” bodies are “beautiful and pure”, and that their “power [is] renewed” during their menses. We see here that, contrary to popular representations, the power and beauty of the female body lies not in its ability to seduce the male gaze, but in its intrinsically divine nature. It is this aspect of the novels’ portrayal of the female body – its inherent power and its relation to the sacred – which I would like to focus on in the discussion that follows. What will be of paramount interest, more than simply images of the female body itself, is the novels’ positive portrayal of the female body’s reproductive functions in general and menstruation in particular. In

order to appreciate the significance of such portrayals, however, we first need to consider the common negative perceptions that they contradict.

In general, the Christian theology that has had a major impact on western thinking has been marked by a group of interrelated notions that can be described as anti-body and anti-woman. This is a tendency which Carol Christ describes as the “misogynist anti-body tradition” of western religious thinking, the development of which can be traced back to the very beginnings of monotheism and the earliest models of holiness and purity which portray the female body as polluting the realm of the sacred (“Why Women” 279). If we think back to the quotation from *Wisdom’s Daughter* (above) and its mention of how women are forbidden to enter God’s sanctuary for fear that their presence might “defile” it, we can identify a reference to the purity laws and the many cultural and religious taboos that have historically limited women’s entry into the sphere of the divine. Scholars trace the origin of such taboos back to biblical law of Leviticus⁸ which not only limits biblical priesthood to men, but also states that a woman “having her monthly period” as well as a woman suffering “vaginal discharge” during labour should be considered “unclean”, and may as a result not enter the house of God without proper purification (Marsmann, 539; 489; 538)⁹. These original prohibitions have lost their vigour and today “only Orthodox Jews still enforce religious taboos against menstruant women” (Christ, “Why Women” 280). Nonetheless, the perception of the female body as impure has never been completely eradicated from the unconscious of what remains predominantly misogynistic religious discourses. Adrienne Rich points out in *Of Women Born*, many contemporary women, having “internalis[ed]” such thinking, still “experience” menstruation as a kind of “uncleanness”, “perceive of themselves as polluted” and display what she calls an “obscure bodily self-hatred” (92, 220).

⁸ Chapters 9, 12 and 15.

⁹ Some scholars argue that it was precisely this “periodic uncleanness of women” which made women “impure” and “unsuitable for the priesthood”, therefore limiting religious leadership to men. I would, however, like to question this logic. According to Marsman, the belief that “blood of the menstruant” and the “discharge of the parturient” was considered unclean was based on the premise that if “blood was associated with life”, “its loss [should be associated] with death”. In further explanation, he quotes De Troyer, who suggests that “[t]he loss of vaginal blood... containing seed, meant the diminution of life and, if unchecked, destruction and death” (Masman 540, 542). Thus it is women’s loss of blood – and therefore life – that associates them with death and makes them impure. Interestingly enough, however, we see that according to this ancient taboo, any “bodily discharge” is considered unclean, making the discharger “impure” and unable to enter the house of God without the proper purification. Such a pronouncement would of course include “semen” which, like menstrual blood, also signifies the loss of “seed” and therefore of potential life (Marman 487). And yet despite its own impure bodily discharge, at no point have patriarchal models classified the body of the male as impure. Obviously, there was also another agenda at work here.

Despite these surviving sentiments, institutionalised religion no longer explicitly condemns the female body for its ‘impurity’. However, the female body is far from redeemed: instead more modern models of holiness have simply found other ways to justify its denigration and to mark women as unholy. Most traditional Christian ideals of holiness and piety are, for example, centred on the denial of the corporeal. Owing to Paul’s “stigmati[sation]” of “physical corporeality” – when he “implants the power of sin within the flesh” – such thinking sees the body as inherently corrupt and sinful and believes that transcendence of one’s corporeality is the only way to attain spiritual purity (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 126). However, as Christ points out, “because of women’s unique position as menstruants [and] birthgivers [their] connection to the body” has always been more “obvious” than men’s and they have been “burdened” by an undeniable corporeality that has marked them as spiritually inferior to men (“Why Women” 279). Thus, in male religious models that conceive of spirituality as “apart from the world and apart from the body”, women’s natural bodily functions have marked them as “more carnal, fleshy and earthy” than the men who are (supposedly) their spiritual ‘superiors’, and this has helped to perpetuate their marginalisation from religious practice and authority (King 92; Christ, “Why Women” 279).

What the above discussion highlights is the fact that the natural and inescapable biological functions of the female body have traditionally been responsible for women’s marginalisation and exclusion from the realm of the divine. Ursula King correctly describes this overarching and long-standing tendency when she observes that “male models of holiness and perfection are often built around the rejection of and utter contempt for female bodies and their natural biological functions” (King 92). It is for this reason that I find these novels’ approach to the female body so significant. Contradicting such negative visions of women’s corporeality, these novels construct new (or reconstruct ancient) models of holiness and perfection that redeem the female body and place it at the very centre of what is considered the sacred. Having said this, it is necessary to consider the manner which *The Red Tent*, *Leaving Eden* and to a lesser extent *The Moon under her Feet*, engage in the process of reclaiming the female body – taking that which originally excluded women from the divine presence and re-constructing it as sacred and as embodying the divine.

The first step that the novels take in transforming perceptions of the female body is to re-represent menstruation not as something that contaminates that body, but rather as a process of purification and cleansing. As is the case with the song in *Leaving Eden* that insists that menstruation has

purified the body and renewed its power, so we also see references in *The Red Tent* to the life-giving and purifying function of menstrual blood. A case in point is that Leah teaches her daughter that such “healing blood” is to be celebrated for “cleansing the body of last month’s death” and “preparing the body to receive the new month’s life” (Diamant 187-188).

This affirming view of menstrual blood is further developed in Leah’s lesson when she disavows patriarchal ideas regarding menses:

[T]o men this is flux and distemper, bother and pain. They imagine we suffer and consider themselves lucky. We do not disabuse them.

In the [menstrual] tent the truth is known. In the red tent where the days pass like a gentle stream as the gift of Innana courses though us...women give thanks – for repose and restoration.

(Diamant 187-188)

The idea of impurity is contradicted as Leah links menstruation to a process of “restoration” to complement the images of purification, renewal, healing, cleansing and preparation we have seen so far. It is also significant that Diamant uses imagery of water, life-giving and purifying by nature, to describe the experience of menses which “courses” through the body and allows days to pass “like a gentle stream”. Clearly menstruation is presented as something positive and even beneficial in these texts – a blessing rather than curse.

Just as the novels challenge the idea that the experience of menstruation makes the female body unclean, they also confront negative perceptions of menstrual blood itself, transforming it from something abject to something sacred. In *The Red Tent*, for example, a young girl’s first menstrual blood is celebrated as something powerful and sacrosanct, something that, during an elaborate ceremony, must be given back to the earth, the original life-giving womb. As the narrator explains, the “precious fluid” is collected in a “bronze bowl” because the “first-moon blood of a virgin [is] a powerful libation for the garden” (Diamant 30). The use of bronze as a receptacle in itself signifies the importance of menstrual blood since it is widely accepted that it was a valued and expensive article of trade in the Ancient Near East. Furthermore, the fact that menstrual blood is described as a libation also emphasises its sacred nature, since a libation is literally a precious liquid poured out as a religious sacrifice. This idea of menstrual blood as a sacred ‘commodity’ is also highlighted later in the novel when Rebecca, priestess at the Goddess’ sacred grove, condemns and curses a mother for, as she puts it, “wasting” her daughter’s first blood (Diamant 185).

In light of the preceding discussion, it is important to note that this positive perception of menses and menstrual blood is clearly and closely linked to the Goddess in each of these novels. We see, for instance, that Leah describes menstruation as Innana's "gift" in *The Red Tent*, while the women's renewal during menstruation is recognised as being brought about "by the Mother's hand" in *Leaving Eden* (188; 105). This link between Goddess and sacred menstrual blood is, however, most clearly explained in *The Moon under her Feet*, when characters express the view that "the Great Mother fashioned the world ... from clay mixed with her menstrual blood" and that as a result the "blood of women is sacred" for the manner in which it carries the "same magical force" [emphasis added] (Kinstler 128). It is the particular nature of this link as highlighted by Kinstler that sheds light on the celebration in *The Red Tent* outlined above: when the women return the first menstrual blood to the garden as a libation, Diamant establishes the same connection between the Goddess's blood and that of the menstruant. This is, for instance, apparent when Leah explains the process to her daughter and states that in "return[ing]" the first blood "to the earth", they are returning it to "to the womb of Innana, to the dust that was mixed with her moon blood" and "formed the first man and the first woman"; in this way they "celebrate the first blood of those that will bear life" – presumably as the Goddess herself brings life (Diamant 188).

It becomes apparent that menstruation and menstrual blood are considered sacred and powerful because they make possible women's role as potential birth-givers and so signal what Julia Kristeva terms their "generative power", their ability to bear life (*Powers of Horror* 77). It is this generative power that links women to the Goddess: they share her capacity to bring forth life as the "Great Mother"¹⁰, the original creatrix, birth-giver and "matrix of life" (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 88, 90).¹¹

¹⁰ We may note that all three novels referenced in this section, with the addition of *Wisdom's Daughter*, at some point refer to the Divine Feminine as the Great Mother – whether she is imagined as being incarnated by one singular or many different Goddesses (Diamant 186; Kinstler 1; Chamberlin 54; Egdhill 6).

¹¹ I am fully aware that some feminist thinkers might find such an emphasis on women's generative function problematic for fear that it reinscribes them into patriarchal models that see it as their only role – given that traditionally woman's role in society has been "overridingly determined by her biological function of being child bearer and mother" – a function that has limited her entry into any other sphere. However, I feel strongly that this is not the case in these novels (King 76). Firstly, I would like to point out that in contrast to patriarchal thinking that has restricted and devalued the role of motherhood – something Rich terms the "domestication of motherhood", the novels clearly present it as an ultimate power, something awe-inspiring and exclusive to women (rather than restrictive to them) (Rich 109). Furthermore, I think the novels' emphasis on the different functions and natures of the various Goddesses mentioned prevent the misconception that there is just one essentialist female role. We may note, for instance, that in the same section of *The Red Tent* where Leah locates this mother-power in both the Goddess Innana and the menstruating celebrant, she

To this end the women, especially in *The Red Tent* and *Leaving Eden*, are seen as embodying the very same Goddess power that is recognised as primal and primary throughout the novels. When, for example, her female family members celebrate young Rachel's first blood in *The Red Tent*, they sing praises to various forms of the Goddess and then praise the new menstruant by asserting that "Astarte is now in [her] womb" and that "[she] bear[s] the power of Elath" (Diamant 29). The novel itself identifies Elath as "the mother of seventy gods", and van der Toorn tells us that in ancient Israel and Canaan, Astarte would have been seen as the very "Mother Goddess" herself, spouse to El, the patriarch of the Ugaritic pantheon and as such the mother of the very gods themselves (Diamant 29; 95). Subsequently, the women celebrate Rachel as embodying the power of these mother-Goddesses, locating their sacred and life-giving powers within her fertile young body¹². A similar assertion can be found in *Leaving Eden*, which suggests that during menstruation, women hold "within" themselves "the Mother-power – [the] power to create" (Chamberlin 93). At another stage the novel asserts that "[a]ny women in the dark of her moon, will know she contains the power, onionlike, within her" (Chamberlin 238). Thus we see that the novels are not only repositioning menstruation as a positive and powerful process linked to the divine, but in the process are also emphasising what Rich defines as the female body's "potential for gestating, bringing forth and nourishing life", in order to portray that body as "a space invested with power" (*Of Woman Born* 90).

The Red Tent, *The Moon under Her Feet* and *Leaving Eden* therefore clearly locate an awesome and life-giving power – something which Kristeva terms the "ultimate sacred" – within the female body (*The Feminine* 14). As Leah explains to her daughter, "[in] the [menstrual] tent ... women give thanks... for the knowledge that life comes from between our legs" (Diamant 188). This approach is

also endows Innana with various other functions that have nothing to do with motherhood and are traditionally non-feminine: "The great mother whom we call Innana is a fierce warrior and death's bridesmaid. The great mother whom we call Innana is the centre of pleasure, the one who makes women and men turn to one another in the night. The great mother whom we call Innana is the queen of the ocean and the patron of the rain" (Diamant 187).

¹² Again, such representations may be seen as problematic because they may seem to limit female power to the reproductive female body, and to exclude the barren and the post-menopausal woman. However, I suggest that we read this in a positive instead of a negative light. As stated before, it has been exactly this reproductive body that has excluded women from patriarchal ideals of sanctity; therefore, it is only fitting that in women's imaginings and theology, they redeem that body, transforming the site of their powerlessness into the very site of their empowerment. If they were to ignore that body, they would be following the same misogynistic anti-body tradition that makes patriarchal theology problematic for women who- try as they may- can never escape the unique biological realities of their female bodies. However, this bodily reality is only problematic and disempowering as long as we keep imaging it from the patriarchal perspective – one that purposefully devalues it.

interesting because many feminist historians and theorists suggest that it is exactly this inherent and sacred female power that patriarchal monotheism is threatened by and tries to suppress when it objectifies the female body, rendering the very reproductive processes that make this power possible as “sinister or disadvantageous” (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 220). Kristeva expresses this in *Powers of Horror* when she observes that the “attempt to establish a male phallic power is vigorously threatened by the no less virulent power” of the “other sex”, and as a result this “uncontrollable” creative power of the female becomes something that needs to be suppressed, its power denied and degraded (70)¹³.

Once one becomes aware of such clear, institutionalised debasement of the generative power of the female body, one might argue that these novels not only challenge this process, but also attempt to reverse it. As they locate the divine power within the reproductive female body that so obviously links women to that most sacred of activities, the reproduction of life, Diamant, Kinstler and Chamberlin are reaching back to the pre-patriarchal awareness that Rich traces in *Of Women Born* – one that recognises the “female as a primal power” and is conscious of her “intrinsic importance, her depth of meaning and her existence at the very centre of what is necessary and sacred” (80). Of the three novels, however, this is made most explicit in *Leaving Eden*. Consider, for instance, the following statements made by women in the text:

It was through us – “through women’s mountain passes” as Rachel so vividly put it- that life came. [And] that was infinitely better than the death men wielded with their spears and knives. (Chamberlin 20)

Men must [puff themselves up]... because the work the gods have given them – hunting and fighting – rides at the edge of life, like babies on their mother’s hips, no longer in her womb. Because Mother did not make them at the centre of being, She gave them pride to make up for it. (Chamberlin 25)

Men ... do not feel the secret rhythms [of eternally renewing life] within their own bodies as women do. (Chamberlin 53).

¹³Obviously the same logic applies to the repression of the Goddess who in her capacity as Creatrix and Great Mother also represents this generative female power. As Kristeva for instance argues, “The mother goddess ...haunts the imaginary of a people” trying to institutionalize monotheism because as “a fertilizable or fertile female body” it is a “pagan power that poses the danger of threatening the logical order” they are trying to promote (*The Feminine* 97).

Such statements might seem to make Chamberlin guilty of the “heavy-handed diatribe against men” of which one reviewer accuses her (Baird 172). They are, however, significant in the sense that their collective theme is not *merely* the denial of men’s centrality to what is “necessary and sacred” (as Rich puts it above), but, by implication, the assertion of women’s centrality. What they seem to suggest is that in contrast to men, who are unable to feel life’s cycles and whose violent and ‘death-bringing’ work places them at “edge of life”, riding on its “hip”, women’s ability to feel the cycles of “eternally renewing life” in “their own bodies” and to bring forth life, places them at its “centre”- still in or part of the “mother’s womb” if you will. Over and above the recognition of their own sacred ability to bear life, the female characters in *Leaven Eden* also recognise their centrality to what Rich terms the “essential mysteries”, based on the fact that their own bodies’ life-giving cycles echo the “secret” and sacred “rhythms” of the greater world around them (*Of Woman Born* 81). Borrowing some of the phrases that Jacqui Alexander uses in relation to African and Caribbean religions, we might suggest that while the men in *Leaving Eden* are portrayed as marginal to life’s central and sacred processes, the women are portrayed as “experiencing [them] in action” as a “bodily experience”, “seated in [their] own life” (Alexander 307-308)

If one takes *Leaving Eden* as an example, it becomes apparent that these novels portray women’s biological reality as intrinsically linking them to both the reproduction of life and the sacred mysteries surrounding it. Rather than excluding them, women’s “uniquely female” body and experience form the basis of their inclusion into a sacred sphere that, in contrast to that of male models, is completely reconceptualised as pro-body and pro-woman (Washbourn, qtd. in King 75). However, implicit in this mode of inclusion is the exclusion of men, and a tendency to marginalise them based on their lack of a uniquely female experience. We can identify this tendency not only in Chamberlin’s assertion that men are at the edge of life and unable to feel its rhythms “as women do”, but also in Diamant’s assertion in *The Red Tent* that “[t]he great mother whom we call Innana gave a gift to women that is not known among men, and [that] is the secret of blood” (Diamant 187). Thus we see that whereas women are marginalised in male models of religion which exclude the female body, in this new model of the sacred, it is men who find themselves on the margins and ‘in the dark’, based on their lack of a female body and experience. As the elderly Dinah observes

near the end of the novel, “What can a woman tell a man about babies and blood?” (Diamant 297).

14

While this may be problematic for the manner in which it perpetuates the male-female dichotomy, simply reversing the familiar models of exclusion, I found it very interesting that the site of women’s greatest exclusion – their obvious corporeality – should become the site of their privileged inclusion. What has been women’s ‘abnormality’, separating them from men’s version of what is considered normative, holy and pure, becomes women’s unique gift – re-imagined as the central force behind the knowledge, experiences and ceremonies that are inclusive of women.

Evidently, the writers of *The Red Tent*, *Leaving Eden* and to a lesser extent *The Moon under her Feet* and *Wisdom’s Daughter*, have discarded male models of religion that place a male God and men at the centre of a sacred that rejects women and marks their bodies as impure and unclean. In the place of such an oppressive and androcentric *theology*, these women have given us a gynocentric *thealogy* that places women, women’s bodies and the Divine Feminine at the very centre of a re-imagined sacred.¹⁵ In this regard Diamant, Chamberlin, Kinstler and Edghill all display the same tendencies that Christ identifies “across religious boundaries and denominations” as part of women’s efforts to “reimagine religion” (*She Who Changes 2*). Their novels can be seen as popular embodiments of the feminist *thealogy* that is changing the face of traditional Christianity. In this sense, I would like to suggest that, like Alicia Ostriker, we identify

women’s writing as a site in which female authors actively subvert male traditions to present women readers with a sense of a vibrant female tradition in which they might confidently locate their own spiritual development and contribute to the creation of new spiritual forms (Walton 89).

¹⁴ In line with the idea of exclusivity, it is interesting to note that both novels also represent womanhood as a sacred and exclusive cult to which men have no access and into which young girls must be carefully initiated. *The Red Tent*, for example, describes first time menstruants as “acolytes” that are instructed into what the novel terms the “mysteries” and the “secrets” of the red tent – mysteries and secrets that uninitiated girls “cannot [yet] understand” and that “men kn[o]w nothing of” (Diamant 53, 15, 203, 188, 208).

¹⁵ In simplistic terms, the word ‘*thealogy*’ makes use of the Greek term ‘*thea*’, meaning ‘goddess’ instead of ‘*theo*’ meaning ‘god’ to imply a discourse on the goddess. As Ursula King points out, “theological reflections about the Goddess are described as *thealogy* which is fundamentally different from traditional male-orientated and male-dominated *theology*” (131).

Perhaps this is in itself the final act of 'inclusion', since these female novelists seem to be moving themselves to the centre of religious thought, offering us women-centred and women-generated visions of the divine and the sacred that until very recently was defined almost exclusively by men.

Conclusion

In the preceding discussion, we have considered the works of six female novelists who dared to transgress the most holy of boundaries and steal the biblical stories that have shaped our perception of God, of society and of women's subordinate place in it. As we traced the manner in which they have reconsidered and rewritten these seminal texts, not only from female perspectives but also in women's interests, we have seen how they simultaneously subvert and revise androcentric ideology, patriarchal myth and phallogocentric theology in order to give us new women's writing in the shape of feminist versions of these sacred narratives. In retrospect we can see how each of these gynocritical texts has employed the ever-popular "dual hermeneutic" of suspicion and desire that Patrocinio Schweickart "recommends for certain male texts that 'merit' it" (qtd in Ostriker, *Feminist Revision* 8).

According to Ostriker, a hermeneutics of suspicion is a negative reading strategy that seeks to disclose the text's complicity with patriarchal ideology. As she explains it, it "concentrates on issues of power and powerlessness" and "insofar as she identifies herself as powerless, the [writer] mistrusts, resists and attacks the embodiment of patriarchal power" (*Feminist Revision* 66). In my own opinion, we have seen such a negative hermeneutic displayed in every instance where the writers critique, problematise, demystify and subvert the strategies and paradigms of the original text. At the heart of each of these novels lies a process of deconstruction that undermines the legitimacy and authority of a text that marginalises, misrepresents and disempowers women.

On the other hand we have also seen that these revisions are by no means marked by a purely negative process of deconstruction and subversion: in their own way they have also bent the original stories to their wishes, constructing gynocentric and feminist alternatives. In this sense we can also locate a hermeneutics of desire at work in each of these novels. As a positive reading strategy, such a hermeneutic is often explained as "find[ing] in the text what one desires to find" (Ostriker, *Feminist Revision* 66). Thinking back to the Introduction and the reader reviews which expressed such fascination at *The Red Tent's* content, I think it has become obvious that the stories reconstructed in these novels have spoken to women's most intimate desires for women-centred stories, beliefs and practices.

According to Ostriker such a dual approach of suspicion and desire “might well serve to describe how writers of any marginalised group ... deal with a dominant culture which both repels and inspires them”, a comment which highlights the more secular aims of these novels’ subversion and revision of the sexist social paradigms justified by the Bible (Ostriker, *Feminist Revision* 57). However, since we can also identify this twin process in the work of feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Reuther, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Judith Plascow and even Mary Daly – all of whom see it as the foundation of critical feminist biblical interpretation which aims to emancipate women from patriarchal discourses – I would like to return to my initial hypothesis and argue that these works of fiction rework and advance the feminist concepts and theories produced by the women’s spirituality movement.

Whether they reflect the ideas of feminist theology or simply mainstream feminism, these novels represent the combined efforts of women to rewrite the biblical stories that have, directly or indirectly, been responsible for their social and religious oppression, marginalisation and degradation. When these women therefore rewrite the Bible, they are also actively rewriting themselves, rethinking their place in the world and re-imagining their relation to the divine. Whether we label their efforts “feminist (sub)versions of biblical narratives”, “imaginative biblical recreations ” or acts of “biblical revisionism”, they are artistic, accessible and popular embodiments of the gynocritical processes and the new ‘readings’ that feminist theologians and biblical critics have been calling for (Exum; Fiorenza, *But She Said* 27; Ostriker, *Feminist Revision* 57). In the end, these novels engage in the creation of what we might term new sacred texts and offer readers new ideologies, new myths and new theologies – all of which place women, both divine and mortal, at the centre of power and significance.

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