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CREATION, NAMES, AND LIFE: HUMANITY AND FEMININITY IN THE FEMALE GOLEM MYTH *

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Abstract: The subtle hierarchy which dictates who is granted and denied cultural authority is rarely more evident than when examining folklore through which “we can see all the shimmering, shadowy uncertainties of the world.”[1] The myth of the Golem, a clay being in Jewish folklore, provides an ideal opportunity for engaging with the default equation of humanity and masculinity, an assumption present in most Golem stories. My research attempts to disrupt this hierarchy that places women as lesser and the human as superior by examining the recuperated figure of the female Golem. I interrogate intersections of the constructed categories of “female” and “human” in Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* and in Alice Hoffman's *The World That We Knew* by tracing the complex literary history of the female Golem, focusing on the misogynistic myth of the female Golem attributed to Solomon ibn Gabirol. Through elaboration upon the feminist critiques advanced by Hoffman and Wecker, I highlight the glimpses of post-humanist thought achieved by each author’s feminist revision of the female Golem, investigating the way certain humanist ideas remain and limit each novel’s feminist project. By drawing on post-humanist philosophy and feminist and Jewish feminist literary

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[1] Frischer, Rita Berman. "Jane Yolen." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 27 February 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on April 20, 2021) <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/yolen-jane>.

criticism to consider these novels, I ultimately propose the necessity of post-humanist thought to the success of feminist interventions.

Keywords: Golem, Jewish Studies, Posthumanism, Feminism, Cultural Studies

YARATILIŞ, İSİMLER VE YAŞAM: KADIN GOLEM EFSANESİNDE İNSANLIK VE KADINLIK

Öz: Kimlerin kültürel otoritesinin onaylandığını ve yadsındığını belirleyen ince hiyerarşisi nadiren "dünyanın tüm parıltılı, gölgeli belirsizliklerini görebileceğimiz" folklorunu ele aldığı zamandan daha belirgindir. Yahudi folklorunda kilden yaratılan bir varlık olan Golem miti, çoğu Golem hikâyesinde bulunan insanlık ile erkeklik varsayılan eşitlemesi ile ilgilenmek için ideal bir fırsat sağlamaktadır. Çalışmam, kadın Golem'in iyileşmiş figürünü inceleyerek kadını ikincil, insanı ise üstün konumlandıran bu hiyerarşiyi bozmayı denemektedir. Kadın Golem'in karmaşık edebi tarihinin izini sürerek Süleyman ibn Cebirol'a atfedilen kadın düşmanı kadın Golem mitine odaklanarak Helene Wecker'ın *The Golem and the Jinni* [Golem ve Cin] ve Alice Hoffman'ın *The World That We Knew'*sında [Bildiğimiz Dünya] kurgulanan 'kadın' ve 'insan' kategorilerinin kesişimlerini sorguluyorum. Hoffman ve Wecker tarafından geliştirilen feminist eleştirilerin detaylandırılması yoluyla bazı hümanist düşüncelerin her bir romanın feminist projesini arta bıraktığı ve sınırladığı yolu araştırarak her bir yazarın dişi Golem'i feminist gözden geçirmesiyle başarılan post-hümanist düşünceye kısa bakışı vurguluyorum. Bu romanları incelemek için post-hümanist felsefeden ve feminist ve Yahudi feminist edebiyat eleştirisinden yararlanarak sonunda feminist müdahalelerin başarısı için post-hümanist düşüncenin gerekliliğini öneriyorum.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Golem, Yahudi Çalışmaları, İnsancıllık Sonrası, Feminizm, Kültürel Çalışmalar

Introduction

"It wasn't a person, Dad, I think it's a woman!" does not merely represent a joke from a 1970s anime[2] but reveals a startlingly apt insight about the position of women in relation to humanist thought. This default equation of humans and male is an assumption throughout most Golem stories. The creature, a clay homunculus created by man to protect Jews from persecution, is constructed as male, affirming the traditional association of strength with masculinity. Thus, it is essential to examine the rare examples of the female Golem, since these representations of the female Golem are directly tied to a culture's perception of women. In this thesis, I conduct critical case-studies of Alice Hoffman's *The World That We Knew* and Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni*, which

[2] For the full episode, see "A Woman Who Burns like Paper." *Captain Harlock*, season 1, episode 3.

both contain modern renditions of the female Golem. I explore how Hoffman and Wecker adapt the traditionally misogynistic female Golem tale for differing feminist ends. Wecker's modernization of the female Golem grants her sentience and individuality, exploring the societal position of women through a consideration of ontological concepts. Hoffman's, more influenced by the contemporary political arena and Donald Trump's rise to power in 2016, takes up the question of feminist solidarity (Manne, 2018, p.103). Thus, Hoffman harnesses history in a distinctive manner, offering a revisionist take on the Golem myth of shared female power defeating the sexism of society. Theoretically, the female Golem as an idea and myth provides an occasion for feminist interventions that step beyond human exceptionalism. In my case-studies, I develop these theoretical possibilities by tracing the advances made in both *The Golem and the Jinni* and *The World That We Knew* but also by highlighting the shortcomings of each.

This literary-historical analysis of two novels will draw from the history of the Golem and contemporary politics to investigate why and how this philosophical shift occurred through the lens of what I call feminist ontology. By feminist ontology, I mean that the experiences of women and the nature of their being cannot be separated from their embodiment and the societal construction of gender. Feminist ontology offers a productive starting point for comprehending the tensions at play in representations of female Golems and how these portrayals stage the dynamic interplay between self-perception and their roles in the Jewish community.

This negotiation of identity is particularly relevant when discussing the significant resemblance between the subservience of a Golem, male or female, and a Jewish woman's traditional role in society. The origin of the word 'Golem' not only describes a clay being, but more figuratively, an unfinished creature: "…an unmarried woman was considered to be, like an unmarried man, an imperfect being, and she was referred to in classical texts as a Golem" (Idel, 2019, p.232). According to this rationale, a woman is inherently deficient, and may only be considered perfect when she has a husband in her life to act as her master. Similarly, a Golem is only supposed to function with a master. In the *X-Files* episode "The Golem" a grieving woman creates a male Golem to avenge her fiancée Isaac's death rendering her "a Golem in the sense that she is incomplete without Isaac" (Nocks, 1998, p.296). Thus, the treatment of the Golem as a creature[3] which must be dependent on a superior being offers an interesting parallel to women and their struggle for autonomy in a culture that denies their personhood.

[3] While I am aware of the scholarship that links the Golem to the quasi-human figure of Artificial Intelligence or a forerunner of the robot, I am interested in focusing on the implications of the Golem's sentience from inception, a feature of the Golem that is distinct from Artificial Intelligence.

However, the ontological problem of the Golems becomes even more complex with recent scholarship. Lisa Nocks has investigated this "missing, unfinished or unresolved" aspect of the Golem, arguing that the term imperfect should be understood as the "unformed (understood as unfinished, but with potential)" nature of the golem's soul (Nocks, 1998, p.283-84). Nocks articulates how the Golem lacks a fully-developed soul, and that it is the characteristic which separates Golems from humans, guaranteeing that the Golem "implicitly remains subordinate to his creator and to other humans" (Nocks, 1998, p.284). The creation's being as directly tied to the status of its soul is extremely telling when examining the link between the subordination of the Golem and the role of women. In this thesis, I examine the ways that Wecker and Hoffman reverse the terms of this connection by exploring the development of the female Golem's selfhood as a rejection of women's natural subordination.

1. The Female Golem in Context

Historically, in most Golem stories, the Golem is male. It is important to specifically distinguish between the female Golem's sex and her gender. All female Golems are anatomically sexed; however, what I am investigating is their gender and how their femininity is culturally constructed[4]. The few stories that feature a female Golem objectify her, using her powerlessness as a tool to create a male fantasy. I will comment on these instances of the female Golem to provide historical context for Hoffman and Wecker's works. In Ludwig Achim von Arnim's 1812 novel *Isabella von Aegypten*, he "...features the Golem as an estranged bride filled with 'Hochmut, Wollust, und Geiz' (pride, lewdness, and parsimony)" (Dekel, 2013, p.243). In the article "How the Golem Came to Prague", Edan Deckel and David Gurley concur with popular opinion to interpret "Arnim's sexually charged Golem Bella as a critique of Romantic desire, a testimony to the legend's departure from rabbinic quarters" (Dekel, 2013, p.243). Whenever male Golems are used, they are not written to represent all men. However, I will demonstrate that Arnim's female Golem is not an exception to the general characterization of femininity; female Golems are written one-dimensionally, to encompass all roles and duties that male authors assume women should have. Thus, it is not unreasonable given the patterns that emerge within Golem literature to declare that historically "[m]ost Golems in literature are males, created by males, to serve as protectors and fighters for a community or a people, with a few exceptions of female Golems that are created for selfish reasons, either for sex or to be housemaids" (Hoffman, 2019, p.380).

[4] For scholarship which considers the construction of the female Golem and creature gender identity in Terry Pratchett's Discworld series, see Held, Jacob M. "A Golem Is Not Born, but Rather Becomes, a Woman: Gender on the Disc." Edited by James South. *Academia*.

Frankenstein, most likely influenced by Golem stories[5], presents an interesting perspective on women as well. The creature, or Golem's, desire to have a female companion and Frankenstein's subsequent fear of her presents the question: why was Frankenstein more afraid of a female Golem than the male Golem which he had already created? Anne K. Mellor argues that this fear represents the true patriarchal horror of "[a] woman who is sexually liberated, free to choose her own life, her own sexual partner (by force, if necessary)…for she defies the sexist aesthetic that insists that women be small, delicate, modest, passive, and sexually pleasing—but available only to their lawful husbands" (Mellor, 1996, p.279). The possibility of such a female Golem in Shelley's novel raises the specter of a Golem who is more like the traditional male Golem. Frankenstein's refusal affirms the fear of strong females, which is "…endemic to a patriarchal construction of gender" (Mellor, 1996, p.279).

The most prominent story of the female Golem is attributed to Solomon ibn Gabirol, a Spanish poet and philosopher of the eleventh century. Ausubel explains that "Gabirol, create[d] a maid-servant Golem. When the king heard of it he wished to put the Jewish poet to death for practicing black magic, but Gabirol demonstrated to the King's royal satisfaction that the creature he made was not human, and forthwith he returned her to dust[6]" (Ausubel, 1948, p.604). In this situation, there is a clearly uneven power dynamic where Gabirol had all the power, for he chose when to create the Golem and when to destroy it. It is worth noting that the Golem is not destroyed because of any harm that she has brought, but simply because she was deemed no longer useful. This is an example of how much of the distinction between male and female Golems in modern and pre-modern times is one of power dynamics. This presents some crucial questions: why did Gabirol want a female Golem rather than the typical male one, especially if women were seen as physically weaker to men? and if he did want a female Golem, why not create a strong female soldier or someone with more power?

It is implied that Gabirol created the maid-servant in order to have a subservient female slave, as she did not possess the physical, financial, or social power to resist him. Similar to the story of Pygmalion, women are created by men and made the literal objects of men, illustrating how mythological ideals reflect gender roles. The king's anger at Gabirol subtly implies that Gabirol wanted the Golem for sexual purposes, as the king's rage seems extreme regarding a woman simply tidying up a house. Gabirol's desire to show her off

[5] For more on the connection between the Golem myth and *Frankenstein*, see Davidson, Jane P. "Golem — Frankenstein — Golem of Your Own." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 7, no. 2/3 (26/27), 1995, pp. 228–243. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43308244. Accessed 17 Nov. 2020.

[6] For further evidence of this female Golem myth, see Baer, Elizabeth R. *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction.* Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2012, p. 20.

to the king, subsequently proving that he had the power to destroy her, positions the Golem not as guardian or protector, but merely as the toy of powerful men. However, this tale is somewhat elucidated in Isaac Bashevis Singer's rendition of the story:

…a female Golem created by the great Jewish poet and philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol who suffered from a severe skin sickness, perhaps leprosy, and had to live in isolation. He was said to have created the woman Golem to keep house for him, to be his companion or perhaps his concubine. According to the legend, this Golem was put together from wood and hinges - not a very convenient helpmate for a genius with a vulnerable skin. He was forced to get rid of her only when the religious leaders discovered her…Also, since a Golem is not born from men's semen and is not grown in a woman's womb, there was no sin in destroying her. ("The Golem Is a Myth for Our Time," 1984)

This more specific rendition is worse in that Singer's more painstaking rationale illustrates how easy it is to elide the female Golem and a woman, the latter being a merely and perhaps unnecessarily human embodiment of servant and sex slave. At the core, Gabirol chose to create a Golem as his housekeeper, his friend, and his sexual plaything. This provides a critical case-study on how men perceived the purpose of women. Furthermore, unlike the traditional end to the Golem which comes about because the Golem "runs amok", disobeying orders and wreaking havoc, the female Golem is destroyed in order for Gabirol to avoid the penalty of patriarchal law. In effect, then, the female Golem's expression of disruptive emotion—anger, desire, rebellion—is pre-empted by patriarchal law. Gabirol destroys his female servant in advance of the threat of exposure, thus demonstrating the power of the male patriarch to control his household. This story is an allegory for the experiences of Jewish women, not because female Golems were considered on par with Jewish women, but because their experiences of inequality and subjugation within a patriarchal system are regrettably similar.

Additionally, most historical male Golem myths toy with the notion of the Golem's humanity—at least acknowledging that we should question how 'human' Golems are. For instance, in David Wisniewski's 1996 children's book *Golem*, even though the male Golem "…had not truly been a man, they recited Kaddish, the prayer for the dead [for the Golem]", illustrating that male Golems are more often considered human, as the community thinks of them on the same level as Jewish men (Wisniewski, 1996, p.28). Likewise, Ausubel's Golem of Prague myth included in *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People* describes how the rabbis and Jewish men of the community who kill the Golem "washed their hands and uttered prayers of purification, as one usually does after being near a corpse" (Ausubel, 1948, p.611). Since the Golem is physically only "a hunk of

hardened clay" it is interesting that the religious men consider him to be human enough to give him this respect and treat him with this distinctly human dignity. Especially when considering this alleged humanity in dialogue with the incompleteness and unfinished nature of the Golem's soul, it is interesting that it is acceptable to defy convention without protest due to the masculinity of the Golem, which humanizes him. On the contrary, Gabirol's female Golem is casually destroyed, and to add insult to injury, "there was no sin in destroying her", since she was immediately disregarded as inhuman. However, she was clearly somewhat anatomically human due to their sexual encounters. Regardless of the physical appearance, whether or not the author considers the Golem human—or equal to humans—is a crucial question to pose for these stories, for the response often determines the Golem's fate.

This repeats the long tradition in which the human as an ontological category is elided with the male subject of history while women are tacitly constructed as the subhuman[7]. Indeed, whether Gabirol's Golem was capable of any feeling or cognition is unknown. Gabirol's decision to omit the possibility of her sentience is the real problem. Unlike her male counterparts, past versions of the female Golem are never granted sentience; she is neither a protector of the weak nor a guardian of the Jews. She is nameless, an object to be debased. In fact, there is absolutely no condemnation on the part of the man using the Golem for this purpose—the only sin according to the religious leaders is that he did not destroy her sooner. Indeed, the traditional Golem myth requires that the man who creates the Golem must be a "…most pious and righteous man, a *tzaddik*…thoroughly learned in *Cabala*, a mystical body of knowledge aimed at understanding the hidden nature of G-d…to heal the sick and combat evil" (Wisniewski, 1996, p.29). This authorizes and endorses the man's destruction of the female body.

2. The Origins of Golems: Creators and Creation Stories

In effect, these creators in the ancient stories characterize the dominant male power structure which subjugates the marginalized groups embodied through the Golems. This imbalance has large implications in the context of the female Golem, since the placement of traditionally well-regarded holy men, called Tzaddikim, in the position of creators excuses their misogyny of creating sexual slaves in the form of the female Golem. Wecker plays off this traditional trope in *The Golem and the Jinni* through the female Golem Chava's creator Rabbi Schaalman. Schaalman as "brilliant, and reckless, and quite amoral," rather than revered, shifts the previous Golem narrative in a significant manner (Wecker,

[7] For more on scholarship concerning other identities socially constructed as less human, see Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Duke UP, 2018. and Jackson, Zakkiya Iman. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*. NYU Press: New York, 2020.

2014, p.40). This emphasis on the making of the Golem, and the specific diction, demonstrates a subtle critique of hierarchy. The basis of religious patriarchy stems from the assumption that G-d is above Adam, or Man, and that Man in turn is superior to Eve, or Woman. This structural relationship of someone in power creating a subordinate is mimicked in the creation of the Golem, in this case, Chava.

Nonetheless, Schaalman is not a Tzaddik, or holy man, but rumored to be "a disgraced rabbi who'd been driven out of his congregation…[and] liked to dabble in the more dangerous of the Kabbalistic arts, and he was willing to offer his services for a price" (Wecker, 2014, p.1-2). The immorality of practicing dangerous and harmful magic merely for material ends appears as a deliberate critique of individualistic capitalism from Wecker. In fact, far from being a respected member of the Jewish community, he lives alone in isolation in a "dilapidated shack, deep in the forest…The path to the front door was a half-trampled trail. Greasy, yellowish smoke drifted from a chimney-pipe, the only sign of habitation" (Wecker, 2014, p.2). This echoes Baer's rendition of Gabirol as Creator who "suffered from a severe skin disease that required him to isolate himself from other human beings," which is substantiated by Bashevis' rendition (Baer, 2012, p.20). Whereas this skin disease gave Gabirol a reason to remain in isolation, and somewhat excused his creation of the female Golem, Schaalman has no such disease. With this, Wecker intends to make readers uncomfortable with this isolation, rendering Schaalman abject. While these undesirable qualities of Schaalman are the perceptions of his male client Rotfeld, who is far from a paragon of human virtue, Rotfeld's framing paints Schaalman as an outcast from the Jewish community. Consequently, the creation of Chava as a docile slave made "for the pleasures of a bed" by this man who is very clearly not G-d, but a man who does not even have G-d on his side, acts as a pointed critique from Wecker. Indeed, these makers follow formulaes to create life much as a chemist does, but it is important to distinguish that these agents of creation do not have inherently godly or spiritual skill that allows them to divinely infuse life. Thus, Wecker uses Schaalman's abjection to interrogate the relationship between past creators of the Golem and divine authority.

Rotfeld distinguishes himself to Rabbi Schaalman, who creates the Golem, by requesting that his Golem wife be dutiful, modest, and to "[g]ive her curiosity…and intelligence" (Wecker, 2014, p.4). This marks an enormous shift from the sexual fantasy of a silent but compliant woman in the previous female Golem myths. However, it is significant that Schaalman inwardly expresses doubt at this progress "wonder[ing] if the man knew what he was asking for", which Wecker uses to further characterize him as a villain (Wecker, 2014, p.4). When Rotfeld dies after bringing the Golem to life, Wecker gives readers an unprecedented case of a masterless female Golem, as until Wecker's rendition

"in the original conception the Golem came to life only while the ecstasy of his creator lasted" (Scholem, 1988, p.99). Since Wecker so clearly bases the foundation of her female Golem story on previous myths, it is interesting to reflect that if Rotfeld had not perished, Chava would have followed in this misogynist tradition of anticipating only the needs and wants of her master. Perhaps this deviation is not only a feminist commentary intended to empower Jewish women, but also a commentary on an antiquated view of marriage being replaced with a more egalitarian one.

While Wecker chose to mimic the structure of Gabirol's Golem story, critiquing the male creator and the patriarchal structure by delving within the myth, Hoffman, certainly knowledgeable about the myth, rejects this history in favor of an explicitly feminist rewriting of the Golem myth. In *The World that We Knew*, Ettie, a rabbi's daughter who becomes a key fighter in the French Resistance, marks the first instance of a female creator for the Golem. Hoffman deliberately chooses to have a young Jewish woman who "wished she were a boy. She had no interest in marriage or babies, only in the world of scholars, from which she was prohibited". This characterization brings attention to those who were traditionally excluded from Jewish thought and intellectual activity (Hoffman, 2019, p.37). Hoffman signifies an enormous repositioning away from a patriarchal tradition and towards a feminist future by presenting an explicit commentary on how women are placed within religious Jewish communities through the character of Ettie. Ettie's position as a creator elevates her to a godlike position. Feminist theologian Mary Daly explains how "if G-d is male, then male is G-d", meaning that the association of the male with the divine creates a pervasive impression that male is somehow inherently elevated (Daly, 1973, p.19). Therefore, Ettie as Creator deconstructs men as fundamentally closer to the divine. In addition, Ettie often gains strength by imagining herself in the position of female biblical figures, such as Ester, who Ettie utilizes to express her frustration with the divine and rationalize her desire as a Jewish woman to fight the dominant culture (Hoffman, 2019, p.89).

Additionally, the communal act of creating the female Golem Ava though powerful women, and no men, is also a deliberate comment on Hoffman's part which points to Hoffman's own feminist views. Indeed, the way in which Ettie creates Ava as a female Golem, rather than a male one, is extremely telling. By having her sister place her menstrual blood "smear[ing] the blood into the indentation her sister had made in the clay figure," the female Creators have marked the Golem as a woman (Hoffman, 2019, p.41). This paradox of having the menstrual blood, a metaphorical antithesis of creation, as the final "ingredient" to make a female Golem is directly tied to women's embodiment. Ettie's younger sister, Marta, who is cajoled into using the blood is extremely uncomfortable with the situation as "this aspect of being a woman brought her shame, even when it was private" (Hoffman, 2019, p.40). Often stigmatized as

"impure", men's fear of menstruation often acts as an excuse to exclude women from sacred institutions. However, what is more holy than the creation of life? Hoffman's use of menstrual blood disavows the "purity and pollution" false binary, claiming female power in a sacred domain which traditionally excluded it as impure (Ortner, 1974, p.72). Menstruation's biblical tie to the creation myth "was associated with Eve's original sin; in medical terms it was designated as that suspicious truant from reality, 'hysteria'" (Basham, 1992, p.3). The subjugation of women through the menstrual cycle within the Jewish community from Ancient Israel to contemporary times is challenged by Hoffman as a "generative power of female embodiment" which serves to positively define the female Golem's femininity, subverting the original myth (Braidotti, 2017, p.36). However, the treatment of Eve in traditional Judaism, is extremely pertinent for evaluating Hoffman's modes of resistance within *The World That We Knew*.

3. The Power of Names

Wecker and Hoffman take particular care with the names of their female Golems, as it is rare enough for a male Golem to have a name. Usually, if the male Golem does have a name, it is Yosef. Instead of a simple translation to Yosefa, both authors choose to deviate from the typical Golem myth. Wecker's righteous Rabbi Meyer names the female Golem Chava (after his late grandmother), which situates him to share the role of Creator with Rabbi Schaalman (who is aptly named "creator of vessels"). Meyer as Creator not only names her but teaches her how to fit in with nineteenth century American-Jewish society, which makes him responsible for much of her identity as a human and a woman. Hoffman, in the same tradition, has the group of female creators name the female Golem Ava "reminiscent of *Chava*, the Hebrew word for life" (Hoffman 45). I contend that much of the female Golems' identities stem from their names, as it alludes to their vibrant energy. In addition, naming represents their individuality as women by playing off of Eve's story within the biblical creation myth of Genesis.

As referenced above, Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* details the journey of the female Golem Chava, created by the estranged Rabbi Schaalman. Chava's master dies at sea on the way to New York City from Eastern Europe. Masterless Chava navigates the social expectations of late-nineteenth century America with the help of elderly Rabbi Meyer. She meets Ahmad, a Jinni trapped for centuries who was spirited away from his homeland of Syria. After Rabbi Meyer dies, Chava marries his nephew to better fit in with her community. However, the climax of the novel reveals that Chava's creator, Rabbi Schaalman, was also the Jinni's master who had enslaved him, through his reincarnations, for centuries. The journey for their freedom and equality, as well as how Chava and Ahmad negotiate their separate identities as immigrant Others, delineates the story as one of immigrant experience and humanity.

In contrast, *The World That We Knew* by Alice Hoffman tells the story of a young Jewish-German woman, Lea, and her journey with the female Golem Ava in World War II. In a desperate attempt to protect her daughter, Lea's mother Hanni begs the local rabbi's daughter Ettie to help create a female Golem as Lea's protector to ensure her safety throughout the war. As Lea and Ava attempt to hide their Jewish identities, they travel to Paris, and then to a convent in rural France. Ettie, who rejects her religious upbringing after her sister's death, fights and eventually dies in the French Resistance. Ava, who falls in love with a magical heron, loses him, offers to die to fulfill Hanni's wishes, but becomes human, abandoning her identity as a Golem.

Chava's name, which is the Hebrew name of Eve, emphasizes her significance, humanity, and femininity as the "first woman" by situating her in a biblical context as a legitimate female figure. Additionally, Jewish feminists in the last few centuries have attempted to revisit Eve's tale, paying more attention to Eve's female power and how it is relevant to contemporary women. Some perceive that Eve's actions constitute her as a "trailblazer who leads humanity from childlike innocence toward an adult life of challenge and responsibility" (Rosenblatt and Horowitz, 1996, p.45). It is relevant that Eve, like Chava the Golem, is a constructed woman. She was created, in the second version of the creation story, from Adam's side (commonly translated as rib). Therefore, Eve and Chava are both invented women, made by and from men in different manners, both placed as not quite as human or important as their male counterparts. Additionally, Eve as the first mother also situates her in a distinctive situation where she is a creation who becomes creator.

Primarily, Chava's difficulties fitting into her contemporary society arise from her lack of comfort with domesticity, a woman's place in the American nineteenth century. She often remarks, in a somewhat plaintive, childlike manner, "But it's hard to sit still for so long!" (Wecker, 2014, p.53). While this restlessness could certainly represent a step in her journey of maturation from an innocent being to an adult, this ignores the value of her restlessness, disregarding it as a distasteful attribute. In effect, her tragedy is that she is a being who never tires, and nonetheless remains largely confined indoors. By having the direct connection to the word "life," Wecker implies that Chava is supposed to have this unique, overflowing energy. Indeed, to trap her in the confines of what society deems acceptable denies her path of personhood which is entirely her own individual narrative. In fact, Chava's buoyant nature and her lively spirit is appropriate for a woman who never sleeps.

It also has an interesting implication that not only is Chava bored with what conventional society has to offer, but that she wants *more*. Scholars Naomi Rosenblatt and Joshua Horowitz use a modern and feminist reading of the bible to explain that the allure of the forbidden fruit to Eve in the Garden of Eden is

potentially because “she’s grown restless and bored in their sultry garden, where everything she needs grows on trees. The gate at the far edge of the garden calls to her and bids her imagine what lies beyond” (Rosenblatt and Horowitz, 1996, p.37). With this reading, it is possible to view Chava and Eve’s restlessness in a broader sense of women attempting to leave domesticity and normality, searching for more meaning and purpose in their lives. Indeed, she is “not content to blindly accept rules…she relinquishes a world of safety and security for knowledge and experience” (Rosenblatt and Horowitz, 1996, p.45). Therefore, Chava’s restlessness is indicative of her desire for freedom and autonomy.

Eve, this name so affixed to the creation myth, “has provided legitimation not only for the direction of the self-hatred of the male outward against women, but also for the direction of self-hatred inward on the part of women” (Daly, 1973, p.45). Therefore, the connection to the biblical Eve, who was blamed for original sin and the downfall of mankind, represents a challenge to the subordination of women, recuperating Eve as a figure through Chava. The Biblical Eve has often been rationalized as “a helper who is his [Adam’s] equal” (Rosenblatt and Horowitz, 1996, p.32). The joining of Eve and Chava legitimizes both constructed women who were denigrated in the past, calling for equal status for men and women.

The use of Eve as the cornerstone figure of their revisions of the Golem myth, however, is a decision to question. Since Hoffman and Wecker were both focused on the creation myth and rewriting traditional Jewish thought on women, it is curious that neither chose to name her female Golem Lilith. Since there are two creation stories in Genesis, the rabbinic tradition dictates that the first creation story, which established man and woman at the same time, exiled the woman Lilith from the Garden of Eden due to her insistence on equality with Adam. Often referred to as a demon, Lilith embodies “women who refuse to yield to male authority” (Plaskow, 1991, p.55). More tangibly, “the first woman is also made of the earth, and not of Adam’s rib. When Cain and Abel quarrel over her, she (and not the battling brothers) is turned back into dust” (Nocks, 1998, p.286). The Golem, also a creature made of earth that returns to dust, would have made an easy parallel to Lilith’s character, particularly a female Golem. Therefore, it is interesting that both Hoffman and Wecker chose to carry on Eve’s legacy, a woman who submitted to Adam, and therefore legitimized patriarchal power, rather than Lilith, a woman who defied these limitations. Perhaps, because of the widespread stigma of Lilith as demon, Wecker and Hoffman wanted to choose someone who could only be thought of as a human woman. Lilith, whose female power “Jewish mysticism associated…with the demonic”, seems to line up with the treatment of previous female Golems, especially since she, like Golems, was also made from dust (Plaskow, 1991, p.189). However, it is

perhaps also because "Eve is Everywoman," a recognizable and universal figure of womanhood who is often devalued (Meyers, 2013, p.3).

4. Wecker's Modernization of the Female Golem

Wecker specifically legitimizes Chava by updating the ancient female Golem myth and creating a sentient and feeling character. Wecker joins other contemporary writers who reexamine and expand upon overlooked, degraded, or vilified characters, decentering the versions previously granted cultural authority[8]. By mirroring the previous Golem myth of the female Golem created for a man's pleasure, Wecker expands on the original myth in a full novel, thus participating in a broad movement which speaks to a bigger cultural shift in how women are represented.

Wecker primarily rewrites women's social roles through the female Golem's labor and the portrayal of her master. In *The Golem and the Jinni*, the master, Rotfeld, desires a female Golem, and in this case Wecker is clear that "[o]n top of his arrogant disposition, he was gangly and unattractive" (Wecker, 2014, p.13). His disagreeable appearance and aggressive attitude do not characterize him as the hero of the story, as Wecker demonstrates how he only yearns for the female Golem because no woman wanted him in the first place. This condemnation of misogyny marks a huge turn from the previous Golem myths, since where this man would be traditionally excused and his unhealthy sexual desires rationalized; instead, Wecker advocates and empathizes with the female Golem. In addition, Wecker subverts the previous instances where the female Golem acted as a maid-servant, because the male authors thought of domestic menial labor as the only labor women were created to do. Wecker critiques the tasks of cleaning and housekeeping from the original myth, acknowledging that housework is the only means at Chava's, and women's, disposal when they are effectively created for men and kept from the privileges of men.

Wecker moreover reworks gendered expectations by critiquing societal conventions which limit women's autonomy. Chava's longing to walk outside at night directly defies social norms of the late nineteenth century, since women unchaperoned, particularly at night, were considered loose women and at danger of being taken advantage of by men. Rabbi Meyer confirms that "[w]omen alone at night are assumed to be of poor moral character. You'd find yourself prey to unwanted advances, even violent behavior" (Wecker, 2014, p.54). It is certainly true that this was a common cultural conception; however, Chava's yearning to walk at night is analogous for her desire for freedom and self-determination. Therefore, it appears that Wecker condemns the limiting patriarchal structures of the time by giving her freedom of thought, which is unprecedented in Golem literature.

[8] Such as Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Marissa Meyer's *Heartless*, and Sarah Henning's *Sea Witch.*

Wecker's revision of gender norms is particularly liberal, for she actively includes men within her feminism by deciding to split the perspective of the book between Chava and the Jinni, Ahmad. This deliberate choice to juxtapose a female Golem with a male Jinni demonstrates Wecker's particular feminism and how it posits a relational matrix in dialogue with Ahmad's character to reveal interests in the construction of masculinity. This gender theory, based in the terms of relativity, explores not only women's experiences, but how men are also trapped inside these constructions of gender in a patriarchal system. This is physically represented within the narrative, for the Jinni's physically-bound form offers an interesting parallel to how Chava feels metaphorically trapped throughout the novel (Wecker, 2014, p.27). The culmination of the novel, which reveals the Jinni's master to be the same as Chava's, strongly emphasizes how their enslavement and liberation, on physical and spiritual levels, have functioned in conjunction with one another. Indeed, Wecker seems to imply that one could not be completely free without the other's liberation, which asserts that men and women must collectively address and dismantle institutionalized patriarchal values together.

It is easy to dismiss Wecker's story as a typical love story where the woman needs a man; however, the Jinni's specific relationship with Chava begs more analysis. Indeed, the Jinni is the one being who Chava is unable to instinctively intuit what he feels. Unlike with anyone else, Chava does not feel oppressed by his needs and desires, genuinely enjoying spending time with him of her own volition. Finally, the Jinni understands her, sees her for who she truly is, does not try to change her, and loves her because, and not in spite, of her peculiarities. Therefore, the envisioning of their relationship as being only able to exist through these conditions of equality displays Wecker's feminism and restructuring of masculinity.

Additionally, it decenters anthropocentric thought by centering the novel around two non-human beings, redefining humanity and sentience in the process beyond merely white men, who conventionally have used the idea of consciousness in a self-serving imperialistically ideological manner. Thus, by deliberately selecting a Golem and a Jinni as protagonists, Wecker attempts to combat consideration of the "human" as a definitive and closed category "embrac[ing] nonanthropomorphic animal or technological Others, prompting a posthuman ethical turn" (Braidotti 29). While this may appear irrelevant to the feminism in both novels, it is important to remember that the questions we ask about animals such as questioning their souls, their emotions, and how we are ethically obligated to them have historically been asked about women by men. Indeed, the depictions of the female Golem seem to play out, in an exaggerated fashion, questions asked historically about women's being and experience of the world: How smart are they? Do they have the same kinds of souls as men? Are they fully human? Are they closer to nature? What is their experience of the

world? In other words, many questions of feminism and ontology, as presented by the female Golem, appear to overlap, which gives us feminist ontology.

Social expectations, shown particularly in *The Golem and the Jinni*, are a powerful shaping tool which forms how Chava recognizes her humanity. Chava's experience as an Eastern European Jewish woman in the United States communicates a broad stream of immigrant stories shaped by the transition to a new life. Both female Golems, and the way they are forced into positions of female caretakers by virtue of being females, demonstrates how there is something about being in a woman's body and experiencing the world as a woman that directly shapes one's experiences. Thus, the female body is the fundamental way which people are recruited into female experience. The nature of women's experiences through embodiment—how the mere appearance of a female body is subsequently gendered by society—is what I am interested in investigating. The status of one's being as mediated by bodily forms as women helps to investigate how women are expected to conform to human culture and feminine expectations. These high expectations delineate the problematic viewing of humanity on gendered lines.

While Wecker similarly attempts to restructure a gendered hierarchy that places women in inferior positions, there are times within the novel when Wecker's feminism is limited. This is partially due to the time in which the novel is set: at the end of the nineteenth century, women certainly had fewer freedoms and were restricted in certain respects. However, some of the limitations do not appear connected to a specific time period but appear to be functions of our own era which have not smoothly transitioned to progressive post-humanist thought. For instance, Rotfeld's death forced Chava to hear the desires of the people around her, as "Without the benefit of the bond between master and Golem, their wishes and fears did not have the driving force of commands—but nonetheless she heard them, and felt their varying urgencies, and her limbs twitched with the compulsion to respond" (Wecker, 2014, p.12-13). The word choice here is interesting, since the word "benefit" is not what is traditionally chosen to describe the bond between master and Golem, and certainly not when the novel is written from the Golem's perspective. In this case, it appears that the empathy which Chava experienced with Rotfeld, and subsequently with all humans, is a disadvantage. Originally, it was established so Chava could comply with her master's orders, keeping in mind that her master never had any need to care for her desires or needs. Even though it appears that Chava is at an advantage with her superhuman power to read minds, Wecker, perhaps unintentionally, is placing Chava in a unique position where in a way all humans are her master. These voices in her head are not in her control, and the quantity "nearly paralyzed her", which offers an interesting commentary on gender roles within the novel (Wecker, 2014, p.34). The fact that Chava has no choice in whether or not she has this empathy implies that Wecker is forcing Chava into

an empathetic role, which is traditionally thought of as a feminine quality. It causes her to instinctively attempt to nurture people, which puts her in a stereotypical feminine role, placing the needs of others before her own. This uncoincidentally reflects many of the specifications that Rotfeld initially requested for “his” female Golem, which begs the question of how much free will Chava has, in reality, throughout the novel. The overwhelming power of these emotions disables Chava. While this may appear merely a function of fantasy writing, this is only an exaggerated version of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which women are expected to engage in caretaking of those around them all the time.

Furthermore, Chava acting as a maid for Rabbi Meyer is complex, because it is certainly an improvement from the ancient depictions where being forced into doing this menial labor is her only purpose. While Wecker is clearly playing off this original myth, it is disappointing that Chava is brought to life to do housework, which reaffirms gender norms, rather than attempting to restructure them. Chava does affirm, “I like doing the work. It makes me feel better and this way I can repay you for your generosity” (Wecker, 2014, p.50). Although Chava tells the Rabbi that she does this housework voluntarily, it seems that Wecker is merely placing the desire for housework onto women—not a materially meaningful difference from the original Golem myth. It is also interesting that this conversation about labor comes directly after the scene where Chava describes how living in the same apartment as the Rabbi discomforts him. Because she knows that her presence discomforts him, she grows anxious trying to please him, which only makes the cycle worse. Therefore, we as the readers understand that Chava immensely desires to please the rabbi and can sense what pleases or displeases him. Therefore, when Chava says that she likes doing the housework, it may not be because she genuinely enjoys this labor, but to comfort the Rabbi, making her feel better because she is conditioned to obey the commands in her head. Thus, even though Wecker attempted in this scene to modernize the original female Golem myth in a more feminist manner, it fails to a certain extent, ironically, because of Chava’s empathy. While the means differ, the outcome is still a female Golem as a servant to the males in her life.

Additionally, the possibility of Jewish women’s education is ignored in this novel, for Chava does not enjoy learning or reading. That is not to say that intellectualism or education is the only way to advance as a human, but in ignoring this entire sphere of education, Wecker indirectly implies that a woman’s place is not in learning. Even though it is allegedly because of Chava’s restiveness, it does not alter the end result, which endorses the gender roles of the time. This bias is only furthered by the Rabbi’s internal comment that his hope for Chava reading “was too much to ask of her. Her nature wouldn’t allow it” (Wecker, 2014, p.53). It is unclear whether Rabbi Meyer is referring to her

nature as a Golem or her nature as a woman. Even if he was referencing a Golem, it indicates that Golems are not capable of true abstract thought. This is a typical portrayal, but one which severely limits the post-humanist thought within the novel, and begs the question of whether or not the Golem myth can ever be fully revised in a progressive context.

5. Ontology and the Status of the Soul through Hoffman's Golem

While similar in some respects, Alice Hoffman's work *The World That We Knew*, details the story of a strong female Golem and mirrors many feminist themes of Wecker's. However, the setting and political context differentiate the works entirely. The female Golem in Hoffman's book is named Ava, also from the Hebrew root "Chai" for "life," similarly enjoys baking and creating, and expresses a zest for life as well. It is significant that both Ava and Chava find joy through baking, since it situates them, as creations, in the role of creators. Consequently, their roles as bakers represent their desire to become creators, to have control over themselves and their surroundings. Chava, in particular, imagined, "Stacking the neat rows of loaves, their brown undersides still dusty with flour, and knowing that she had made them" (Wecker, 2014, p.97). Ava is situated in a much more overtly feminist novel than Chava in which Hoffman directly criticizes the silencing of women and advocates for female power and resistance against the patriarchy.

Both works situate themselves around the issue of a female Golem's humanity. Traditionally, a Golem has an "animal soul", sentient and living with a basic soul called a nefesh, but lacking higher cognitive, abstract thought of the neshamah which gives an excuse to treat them as lesser. This is strikingly similar to how Kabbalistic Jewish thought centers on the soul. According to this position, women and men inherently have different feminine and masculine souls (Berg, 2004, p.225). Supposedly, these souls are equal; however, the status of the souls likewise gives legitimacy to those who would treat women differently and as Other. The allegedly "separate but equal" status of the souls points to women's souls as "Other", which "is inscribed on a hierarchical scale that spells inferiority and means 'to be worth less than'" (Braidotti, 2017, p.23). Wecker and Hoffman both investigate whether or not these female Golems have souls, and therefore are fully human. The physical appearance of a Golem is quite secondary, since both Chava and Ava look and appear to all people as normal young women. Indeed, Ava's maker, Ettie, "did not see clay before her, but rather a woman who had been made by women, brought to life by their blood and needs and desires" (Hoffman, 2019, p.324).

Hoffman's conclusion about whether Ava has a soul is, "If you could love someone, you possessed a soul" (Hoffman, 2019, p.348). Conversely, Hoffman argues that humans do not necessarily have souls, for in Germany "Demons were on the streets. They wore brown uniforms, they took whatever they

wanted, they were cold-blooded, even though they looked like young men" (Hoffman, 2019, p.7). This radical concept which Hoffman delineates of potentially losing one's soul, or being rendered soulless, demonstrates that there are consequences for those who wrong others. This punishment of evil, particularly a masculine evil, serves to put responsibility and penalties on men who are traditionally excused within society. This image of the male Nazi officers is therefore not coincidentally powerfully associated with an uncompromising hypermasculinity with no ambiguity, but a need for categories and dominance. In this way, Hoffman places the feminist Ava, someone not traditionally considered human, above the physically human misogynistic Nazi officers, who act with cruelty and callousness.

Hoffman offers a significantly more radical retelling of the Golem myth; however, there are still limitations on Hoffman's feminism which should be addressed. Ava's role within the story is certainly contingent upon her fight against persecution in World War II. On the other hand, the specific reason why she was called upon to be a protector was in order to act as a substitute mother for Lea, and to love Lea as a mother since her own biological mother could not. This perspective affords a complex messaging of situating developments throughout the novel, since it reveals how Ava acts under a compulsion, but not her own desire. Indeed, Ava does not choose to act as a mother, but is forced into this position against her own volition. This ties into the common cultural myth of mothers not being able to resist helping children due to their hormones and societal expectations. This is not to discredit the power of maternal love, which should not be disregarded by a feminist discourse. However, it is one situation to applaud Lea's mother for sacrificing herself to save her daughter, and another to force all women into the position of mothers without their consent.

6. Limitations of the Post-Humanist Intervention

It is therefore necessary to address that perhaps it is not the authors and their ideologies which are limited, but perhaps the female Golem itself. For centuries, female Golems, like all Golems, have been defined by Jewish men. Therefore, the repurposing of this myth reimagines a being always intended to be subjugated and never intended to be truly liberated as an autonomous being. This intersection of the post-humanist and feminism shows how authorial feminist intention can be limited by the source material.

Both of the works discussed not only reflect the evolving attitudes towards women, but also how the idea of sentience has resisted an older, patriarchal version of the Golem. Instead of giving life and taking life haphazardly, the metaphysics have been rethought. Thus, Wecker and Hoffman both play a large role as literary scholars and popular authors in rethinking what makes someone or something human. By interrogating the lesser, second-class status of women globally both authors share a post-humanist stance that female Golems are

affectively humans. This pushback against human exceptionalism is not merely a reevaluation of a woman's place based on a twenty-first century standards for women. It is also a rejection of the logic of dominance and subordination.

Our typical assumptions about the 'givenness' of human experience, especially via women, is what is at stake in these depictions. Indeed, the notion of the "human" is already problematic: to be included as a "human" may be a backward step, as it does not accept creatures such as Golems for who they are, forcing them to conform with societal expectations and assimilate. Therefore, it is necessary to question "human" as a category, and to recognize the hierarchical designation for humanity on which humanist thought bases itself. Indeed, Sherryl Vint asserts, "The ability to construct the body as passé is a position only available to those privileged to think of their (white, male, straight, non-working class) bodies as the norm" (qtd. in Schalk, 2018, p.104). Therefore, the limitations of this novel are in part due to the original construction of the myth, as well as the centering of a white, heteronormative society. Therefore, it is problematic that Wecker and Hoffman affirm that the way to be accepted as a human is to go through gender, especially when the feminine roles available to women in both novels are so limited. Since Chava and Ava are female Golems, the necessity for them to act as "normal" human women inherently places them in a lower societal position, for the hierarchical nature of humanity[9] devalues female identity in the first place. Therefore, this challenge of reimagining race and gender outside of a white patriarchal humanity renders these novels limited projects. The female Golems succeed at assimilating as human only by affirming the essentially separate nature of women and men and thereby reinstituting the very essentialist and hierarchical logic embedded in male-dominated human exceptionalism.

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[9] In the section of my thesis that looks at these novels using some animal studies' critics, I do consider Ava's romantic relationship with the heron as situating Ava's experience outside of this male-centric hierarchy.

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