

# SUBVERTING THE HEBREW MYTH: FEMININE WRITING IN ANITA DIAMANT'S *THE RED TENT* \*

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## ABSTRACT

Anita Diamant's first novel *The Red Tent* (1997) retells the story of Dinah, Jacob's and Leah's daughter, Joseph's sister in the Genesis chapter of the Old Testament. In this revised story, Diamant creates Dinah, the silenced woman of the Old Testament, as the narrator of the novel. Weaving a different narrative than the Hebrew myth, the narrator tries to subvert hierarchical structures of phallogocentrism by focusing on women's bodies, femininity, and sexual power. This study, basing its argument on post-structuralist feminist theory, examines how patriarchal ideology and discourse are challenged through female language and 'feminine writing'. The analysis of the rewritten text reveals that feminine writing frees the female body and female sexuality from the authority of androcentric ideology. Additionally, the textual strategies, used by Diamant to deconstruct the patriarchal order and to create a gynocentric myth, present alternative definitions of female identity.

**Key Words:** *feminine writing, gynocentric, phallogocentric, post-structuralist feminist theory*

## İbrani Mitinin Yıkımı: Anita Diamant'ın *Kırmızı Çadır*'ında Dişil Yazı

### ÖZET

Anita Diamant'ın ilk romanı *Kırmızı Çadır* (1997), Eski Ahit'in Yaratılış bölümündeki Yakub ve Lea'nın kızı, Yusuf'un kız kardeşi Dina'nın hikâyesini anlatır. Bu yeniden yazımda, Diamant, Eski Ahit'in sessiz bırakılan kadını Dina'yı romanın anlatıcısı yapar. İbrani mitinden tamamen farklı bir anlatı yaratan yazar, kadın bedeni, dişilik ve cinsel güce odaklanarak fallogosentrizmin hiyerarşik yapılarını alt üst eder. Bu çalışma, ataerkil ideoloji ve söylemin dişil dil ve 'dişil yazı' aracılığıyla nasıl sorgulandığını argümanını post yapısalcı feminist kurama dayandırarak incelemektedir. Yeniden yazılan metnin analizi, dişil yazının kadın bedenini ve deneyimlerini erkek merkezli ideolojinin otoritesinden kurtararak özgürleştirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Buna ek olarak, Diamant'ın ataerkil düzeni bozmak ve kadın merkezli mit yaratmak için kullandığı metinsel stratejiler, kadın kimliğinin alternatif tanımlarını sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *dişil yazı, ginosenrik, fallogosentrizm, post-yapısalcı feminist kuram*

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## Introduction

Anita Diamant's debut novel, *The Red Tent* deals with the tale of Dinah, Jacob's and Leah's daughter, Joseph's sister in the Genesis part of the *Old Testament*. Dinah's life is told briefly and implicitly in the *Old Testament* unlike a well-known plot about her father, who is considered the ancestor of the Israelites, and his twelve sons. In this new version, the writer not only gives Dinah a chance to narrate her own life and her mothers', Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah, with her own perspective but also changes important parts of the Biblical text, centering upon men and their Gods, to create a tale of women and their bond with Goddesses and one another. By putting the marginalized woman of the Bible at the center of her work, the author makes Dinah the narrator of the novel. The narrator attempts to undermine phallogocentric discourse by focusing on women's bodies, femininity, and sexual power and weaves a tale that is different from the Hebrew myth. This research examines how patriarchal ideology and discourse are opposed through the female language and 'feminine writing', basing its argument on post-structuralist feminist theory.

Anita Diamant, known for her journalistic and non-fiction writing on Jewish life, decides to write her first work of fiction, *The Red Tent*, after the age of forty. During this time, she works as a visiting professor at Brandeis University and spends a few years researching Ancient Near East. She explores everyday life in the cultures of Ancient Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Egypt (Flag, 2009). Diamant states that she has been careful because she has not wanted to "make historical mistakes" (Cabot, 2000: 34) while writing the novel and she has studied gynecology subjects such as midwifery, birth control, abortion, and menstruation (Justice, 2007) which are among the main issues of the novel. By blending historical and cultural information with her imagination, Diamant recreates the lives of Jacob's women and daughter in detail. In a statement to *The Washington Post*, she says that her goal is not to be an author writing about women and she is not a feminist. However, she has been interested in women's lives and achievements since the beginning of her career as a journalist (Diamant, 2002). Even though the echo of the language of Genesis is observed in the narration, its epic splendor is not imitated in the novel. Diamant's carefully chosen words and her use of feminine writing combine the contemporary text with the archaic one. While Diamant does not modify the polygamous family including four mothers - Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah - and eleven sons, she creates a gynocentric life by giving voice and placing these women and his daughter at the center of the story.

When the novel is published, Diamant is accused of antisemitism and the novel is subjected to negative reviews. The author explains that she received furious emails and letters from people who claim that she has misinterpreted the sacred text and disrespected the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Bible, and a "parochial high school for girls" attempted to disallow it and to remove it from their reading list (Diamant, 2019b). *The Red Tent*, on the other hand, has inspired a lot of people since it has presented the Bible to them from a fresh perspective and sparked new thoughts about its characters, particularly its female characters. In addition to these aspects, some critics have labeled the novel as an ancient tradition 'midrash', which is a term that interprets or fills the gaps in Biblical texts. Diamant remarks that she has written, "*The Red Tent* as a novel – not as an extra chapter in the Bible" and she explains that:

*[she] wasn't intimidated by the process because [she] did not think of [her] work as scholarly or theological. [She] probably would have been far more tentative and worried had [she] tried to remain in a "faithful" dialog with the words on the page and the story as given and understood within [her] religious tradition. But from the start, [she] intended to depart from the text to make the story [her] own (Diamant, 2009: 419).*

Diamant aims to give a voice to the silenced women of the Hebrew Bible and give them a chance so that they can tell their stories from the female perspective. In an interview, she clarifies “*The Red Tent* is ... a work of fiction”. She notes as follows: “Its perspective and focus—by and about the female characters—distinguishes it from the biblical account, in which women are usually peripheral and often totally silent. By giving Dinah a voice and by providing texture and content to the sketchy biblical descriptions, my book is a radical departure from the historical text” (Diamant, 2009: 426). In *Pitching My Tent: On Marriage, Motherhood, Friendship, and Other Leaps of Faith*, Diamant writes a chapter, “Midrash-or Not”, to have the last word on this debate and states: “Right there on the cover it says, “A Novel.” But I’m ready to stop arguing. *The Red Tent* may have come out of my head, but it’s out of my hands” (2003: 210). The author does not write a midrash but rather writes a novel by expanding and adapting a few lines of Dinah’s life story to the modern world.

### **Feminine Writing in *The Red Tent***

The Bible is an androcentric narrative in which patriarchal ideology and masculinity are validated while womanhood is ignored. Women are not given a voice and they are characterized by conventional gender roles such as mothers, wives, daughters, or sisters. Esther Fuchs, who examines the patriarchal portrayal of women in the Gospel, marks that the holy text “reduces women to auxiliary roles, suppresses their voices and minimizes their national and religious significance” (Fuchs, 2003: 12). According to her, such texts explain the history of women’s inferiority, but they also argue that this inferiority is required. The Bible supports the idea that men should dominate women and women are attributed domestic roles such as childrearing and faithful wife by men. In this sense, submission of women is portrayed as the ideal. In *The Creation of the Patriarchy*, Gerner focuses on the idea that many of the most important metaphors and concepts of gender used in Western culture come from the Bible (1987: 161). Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir, who criticizes the tale of the origin of woman referring to *Genesis* in *The Second Sex*, argues that woman is considered non-essential and Other:

*Eve was not [...] fabricated from [...] the same clay as was used to model Adam: she was taken from the flank of the first male. Not even her birth was independent; God did not spontaneously choose to create her [...]. She was destined by Him for man; it was to rescue Adam from loneliness that He gave her to him, in her mate was her origin and her purpose; she was his complement in the order of the inessential* (1997: 173).

As critics highlighted above, Diamant also refers to some descriptions of the *Old Testament* that disregard women and changes these descriptions by deconstructing the subtext. In a review of the novel in *Reform Judaism Magazine*, the author states that her aim was not “to explain or rewrite the biblical text but to use Dinah’s silence to try to imagine what life was like for women in this historical period” (Fetterman, 2007). She implies that Dinah would no longer be just a footnote like in the Hebrew Bible, on the contrary, she would assume a dominant role as the narrator of the novel. It can be deduced that Diamant tries to underline “What happens when women re-imagine culture?” as Ostriker says in her article “Out of my Sight: The Buried Woman in Biblical Narrative” (1993: 27). In the ‘Prologue,’ Dinah starts the novel by saying, “My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust. ... my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother” (Diamant, 2009: 21). Diamant begins her novel by giving reference to the original text because neither voice nor much space has been given to Dinah in the biblical text. Now, it is Dinah’s turn to speak and share the story from her perspective. In the prologue she gives the signal that she will be the narrator of the novel and she calls out to modern women to hear the other side of the old story:

*You come to me—women with hands and feet as soft as a queen's, [...] and so free with your tongues. You come hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me, and my mothers. [...] I will pour out everything inside me so you may leave this table satisfied and fortified (Diamant, 2009: 24).*

As claimed by Diamant, the Bible gives little or no mention of mothers and daughters while giving details about fathers and sons (Diamant, 2020).<sup>1</sup> The stories of women that have not been told are lost in time and their names are forgotten. Therefore, Dinah needs to narrate the story of herself and her mothers, as she gives voice to the women of her family. Diamant explains why Dinah feels the need to present her life in all its details: “the stories of my life were forbidden to me, and that silence nearly killed the heart in me” (Diamant, 2009: 23.) In this sense, the author enables Dinah, as the narrator of the story, to deconstruct the Hebrew myth and create a new tale from a woman's perspective.

Dinah transforms her rape story into a love story in the book. In Genesis 34 it is narrated that she is violated by the son of Hivite King Hamor, Shechem, and afterward, he wishes to marry her: “{34:2} And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw her, he took her and lay with her, and violated her. {34:3} His soul was strongly attracted to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the young woman and spoke kindly to the young woman. {34:3} So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, ‘Get me this young woman as a wife.’” (Scofield, 2002: 58). Nevertheless, Jacob and his sons declare that if all the men in Hamor's kingdom are circumcised, they will permit Dinah's marriage. Based on this request, all men in the city are circumcised. Three days later, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, attack the city and kill every male including Shechem and take Dinah back. The Biblical story of Dinah ends here and the reader does not learn what happened to her after these incidents. It is clear that she is treated as an ‘object’ exchanged between men and also as an ‘object’ within the text itself. Neither her father nor her brothers ask Dinah for her opinion or care about her feelings. In other words, the men's decision seals Dinah's fate and they silence her voice. When she is asked why she changed the rape story to a love affair, Diamant explains the following:

*I could never reconcile the story Genesis 34 with a rape because the prince does not behave like a rapist! After the prince is said to have “forced” her (a determination made by her brothers, not by Dinah), he falls in love with her and asks his father to get Jacob's permission to marry her, and then agrees to the extraordinary, even grotesque demand that he and all the men of his community submit to circumcision. Furthermore, I wanted Dinah and all of the women in my story to be active agents in their own lives, not passive pawns or victims (Diamant, 2019a).*

Diamant's plot diverges when Rachel, one of the wives of Jacob, and Dinah go to Shechem to a midwife for the King's concubine so that she can give birth. There she encounters Shalem. It has been a kind of love at first sight and they feel deep affection for each other. Meanwhile, in *The Red Tent*, Shechem is called Shalem. Tumanov comments on the reason for the change of his name as follows: “It is no wonder that Diamant changes Shechem's name to Shalem—a word related to the Hebrew root for “peace” or “safety” (Tumanov, 2007: 378). Shalem's declaring Dinah his wife after their physical union is a sign that they do not conform to traditional marriage notions or wedding ceremonies and they only believe in their mutual love. Diamant underlines in her novel that Shalem adores Dinah and is kindhearted toward her. It is known that Dinah loves Shalem so much that after her brothers have circumcised all the men and have carried her back home, Dinah does not forgive her father and siblings for killing the man he loves and curses them. She then flees to Egypt with Shalem's mother. Dinah narrates with passion how she and Shalem have sexual intercourse: “I, who had never been touched or kissed by any man, was unafraid. He did not hurry or push, and I put my hands on his back and

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication through e-mail on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

pressed into his chest and melted into his hands and his mouth” (Diamant, 2009: 249-50). The author reverses the fact that sex is restriction for women and is afraid of talking about it, and she provides women with the comfort of recounting their sexual experiences freely without embarrassment. Here it can also be deduced that the writer tries to change the ideas and behaviors which cause men to see life from a limited gendered frame. For this, she creates a man who cares her lover's feelings before or after sexual intercourse. When Shalem, for instance, see that Dinah's cheeks were wet, he assumes that he has hurt his wife and states: “little wife. Do not let me hurt you again”. Dinah's answer: “my tears had nothing of pain ... They were the first tears of happiness in my life” (Diamant, 2009: 226) shows that he does not abuse Dinah and she experiences: “the pleasures of love” (Diamant, 2009: 226). Compared to the rape incident in *the Old Testament*, it is observed that the patriarchal mindset is changed positively in the novel and the idea that male is free to abuse is reversed with a love story.

As a female author who writes about oppressed and silenced women, Diamant takes responsibility for drawing attention to the issue that women can have sex freely and passionately like men and women must possess the confidence to be unrestricted in their erogenous joys. In her article “The Laugh of the Medusa” Hélène Cixous opposes patriarchal ideology and emphasizes that “woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies [...]. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history” (1976: 875). Cixous encourages “women to write beyond the order of binary oppositions of the Symbolic Order, to speak and write through their bodies, to uncensor their erogenous pleasures, thus deconstructing the value hierarchies that shape the androcentric world” (Chakraborty, 2013: 2898-99). Diamant not only gives Dinah a voice but also allows her to discover her desires, sexuality, emotions, and self-respect. She challenges the phallogocentric discourse by speaking about the forbidden joys of the feminine body. Diamant's writing of feminine sexuality, which would enable women to reclaim their suppressed language, deconstruct men's attempt to bury women's voices in *Genesis*.

Diamant not only makes Dinah speak but also her mute mothers. For example, Jacob's first wife Leah reveals her feelings while she is describing her wedding night with Jacob to other women: “I was naked before him. [...] his sex pointing at me. [...] Jacob was good to me. He was slow to enter me the first time [...] Then his hands [...] wandered over my face, through my hair, and [...] on my breasts and belly, to my legs and my sex, [...] He looked at my pleasure, [...] We both laughed” (Diamant, 2009: 59). Throughout the narrative Dinah sometimes lets her mothers talk, and sometimes she continues to tell their stories. She expresses the feelings of women very well because she has a chance to spend time with the women in the tent and to observe them. Dinah also recounts the first night that her mother, Leah, and her father, Jacob, lived. Dinah does not hesitate to describe erotic scenes at length in her narrative. She expresses how her mother and father kissed and embraced each other again and again. She tells how her mother loved the smell of Jacob and “the feel of his beard on her skin” (Diamant, 2009: 61). Leah describes: “her sex with a kind of strength that surprised her” and “she was flooded by a sense of her own power”. She feels that her body and sexual desires must be heard by removing the censorship surrounding a woman's relationship to her sexuality. It can be concluded that Diamant's version tries to create a new narrative and a life devoid of taboos associated with female sexual pleasure which cause women make their voice heard by expressing their bodily desires.

It seems that while giving a new life to her protagonist and other women, Diamant desires to put the female voice and female body in the center of the text and narrates women's sexual experiences by using the five senses. By allowing the women to talk about sexuality, the

writer gives the message that “the female body is not to remain the object of men’s discourse or their various arts but that it becomes the object of a female subjectivity experiencing and identifying itself” (Irigaray, 1993: 59). Anita Diamant, aiming to challenge the cultural and patriarchal norms, represents the reality of women’s love, women’s sexual desires and women’s bodies as it is. Like Leah, Bilhah, one of the wives of Jacob, also enjoys sex and does not hesitate to share the pleasures of her body with other women:

*I put my hand upon his sex and laid his hand upon mine. He lifted my skirt and massaged my belly and my breasts. He buried his face between my thighs, and I almost laughed out loud at the shock of pleasure. When he entered me, it was as though I had fallen into a pool of water, it was as though the moon were singing my name. It was all I had hoped for. I slept in Jacob’s long arms, cradled like a child for the first time since my mother held me, may her name be set in the stars. (Diamant, 2009: 84-85).*

It is perceived from the quote that while in the Biblical text, you are not permitted to talk about women’s sexuality, Dinah and Jacob’s wives find a chance to narrate their bodily desires. In this revised version of the story “women’s imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible” as Cixous expresses (1976: 876). French feminists have believed that women’s developing their style of writing which would create new spaces for them is the only way to escape from the patriarchal discourse. They have questioned assumed sexual norms using post-structuralist discourse and psychoanalysis as a method, particularly the ideas of Lacan and Derrida, and they have also motivated women to stand against cultural taboos and challenge the oppression of women. Therefore, they have emphasized language and how the meaning is produced. With feminine writing, they have highlighted how women express their bodies and sexuality, which are plural and fluid. In this rewritten story of Biblical text, coded phallogocentric standards are tried to be changed by focusing on Dinah and her mothers’ expression of their bodies because “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse” as Cixous offers (1976: 883). It is known that she has acknowledged the challenge of identifying and creating a feminine writing approach but she also states that “this practice can never be theorized enclosed, coded-which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination” (Cixous, 1976, 883). Consequently, women in the novel try to decenter the man-made language and express themselves through their bodies which will change their passive and secondary position.

Except for Zilpah, one of Dinah’s mothers, almost all women in the novel do not refrain from depicting their bodies and the pleasure they get while having sex. After giving birth her twin sons, Zilpah refuses to be with Jacob. It can be said that this is Zilpah’s uniqueness and decision about her body and wishes because Jacob or other men do not attract her attention. In the male-dominated order, sexuality is seen as a taboo that should be hidden or shamed and a prohibition that should not be experienced until the woman gets married. Considering this situation, it can be deduced that by writing about woman’s sexuality, Diamant seeks to resist oppressive patriarchal discourse and subverts man-made language, gender roles, and binary oppositions. As Chakraborty states: “By writing the body, in feminine discourse, Cixous, like her contemporary, Luce Irigaray, seeks to deconstruct the singular or linear writing that structures the masculine language. According to both Cixous and Irigaray, women operate from a plural, circular, [...] and hence their language is plural as their plurality is contained in their sex organs which, unlike men’s, is not singular but multiple” (2013: 2901). The author gives Jacob’s women the chance of exploring female representation. The only way Dinah can explore

her identity that is distinct from the symbolic order and can find a relation to the maternal feminine (Irigaray, 1985) as a subject is to write in “white ink” as Cixous associates with “mother milk” (1976: 881). To achieve this, she establishes a strong bond not only with her birth mother but also with ideal mothers who raise Dinah with their stories and rituals. She learns different things from each mother; Leah gives her birth and teaches her bakery, Rachel teaches her midwifery as a profession, Zilpah makes her think and train in storytelling and Bilhah becomes a good listener for her. It can be inferred that Diamant, with her own text and fictional characters’ voice and storytelling, undermines the name of the father by providing an alternative rewriting.

In Diamant’s novel, the female body and its functions are generally glorified. It has been demonstrated that the menstrual cycle and giving birth are also seen as miracles that make women special agents: “The great mother whom we call Innana gave a gift to the woman that is not known among men, and this is the secret of blood. [...]—to men, this is flux and distemper, bother and pain. [Men] imagine we suffer and consider themselves lucky” (Diamant, 2009: 210-211). Dinah emphasizes the sanctity of women’s menstrual period with this statement, and this experience is not identified as a “taboo” or “an unclean bodily function” (Finding, 2004: 50). Along with all the women in the novel, Dinah’s transition from girlhood to womanhood is celebrated in the red tent. When her mothers, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah, learn about Dinah’s first menstruation, she has been surrounded by smiling faces and they greet her with many kisses. Then her ceremony for “opening the womb” has begun (Diamant, 2009: 231). Her mothers apply henna on her palms and the bottoms of her feet: “Unlike a bride, they painted a line of red from [her] feet up to [her] sex, and from [her] hands they made a pattern of spots that led to [her] navel” (Diamant, 2009: 227). While they are putting kohl on her eyes, Leah says: “you will be far-seeing” and when she is perfumed, Rachel says: “you will walk among flowers” (Diamant, 2009: 227). In the next step of the ritual, Dinah finds herself outside. She is naked, lying face down on the soil. Her mother arranges her arms wide “to embrace the earth” (Diamant, 2009: 229). Then her mother bends her knees “to give the first blood back to the land” and Rachel says “Mother! Innana! Queen of the night! Accept the blood offering of your daughter, in her mother’s name, in your name. In her blood may she live, in her blood may she give life” (Diamant, 2009: 229-30). During the ceremony, all women are very kind and funny. In many religions, menstruation is viewed as ritually impure but in the novel it is clear that menstrual taboo is subverted with rituals which make Dinah and other women feel perfectly happy. Each step of rituals allows Dinah to think womanhood as a sacred thing.

The blood of a girl who steps into womanhood is presented first to the earth and goddess Innana. It can be said that with this ceremony, Diamant subverts the holy text by creating female characters who offer their first blood to the earth. This can be interpreted as women’s having a voice over their bodies. She is blessed like “an untouched bride away from any future husband” (Finding, 2004: 55). Dinah says that her brother Levi’s wife, Inbu, and her family have been surprised to see such a ceremony and explains her family’s thoughts about the bloody sheet: “Inbu’s family knew nothing of the ceremony for opening the womb. Indeed, when she married my brother, her mother had run into the tent to snatch the bloodstained blanket of her wedding night, just in case Jacob—who had paid the full bride-price—wanted proof of her virginity. As though my father would wish to look upon a woman’s blood” (Diamant, 2009: 231). Diamant emphasizes the rituals of women for the menstrual period as sacred values and also criticizes the old tradition of showing bloody sheets as proof of virginity. Dinah also expresses the sacred feelings that a woman has at the moment of delivery when she takes her baby in her arms in Egypt: “There should be a song for women to sing at this moment, or a prayer to recite. But

perhaps there is none because there are no words strong enough to name that moment. Like every mother since the first mother” (Diamant, 2009: 295).

In her book about the stories of mothers in the Hebrew Bible, Bronner mentions that women’s maternal status is important in the Bible since with this status, they can be influential and powerful both at home and in the public sphere, and they are not built as mere pawns dependent on men. They are real heroines that emerge as unforgettable Bible figures (Bronner, 2004) and accordingly, Inna, Rachel, Dinah, and Meryt, the novel’s four main characters, accomplish great things as mothers and midwives. They are exalted in the novel with their abilities and achievements. Besides, in *The Red Tent*, situations such as rape and infertility that marginalize women are reversed. Rape is subverted with Dinah and Salem’s love story and infertility is transformed with Rachel’s story. Although Rachel cannot give children for a long time to Jacob, he is charmed by Rachel and loves Rachel. In the novel, it is not seen that Jacob makes Rachel upset or humiliates her because she couldn’t have children.

In the *Old Testament*, there is no detailed information about Dinah’s marriage. Both her ex-husband Shalem and her second husband Benia in Egypt are full of love and kindness to Dinah. Dinah forgets the dishes she has learned from her mother and feels embarrassed that she cannot cook for Benia. However, Benia says to her, “I did not marry you to be my cook” (Diamant, 2009: 354). Diamant also reverses the patriarchal culture by not creating a male character who expects duties such as housework, cooking, or maternity from his wife. In this marriage, Dinah is not presented as just a voiceless wife confined to the house. On the one hand, she maintains the profession of the midwife, which has an important place in her time, and on the other hand, she is a good storyteller: “Benia and I shared stories in the evenings. I told him of the babies that I caught and of the mothers who died, [...]. He spoke of his commissions—each one a new challenge, based not only upon the desires of the buyer and builders, but also upon the wishes of the wood in his hand” (Diamant, 2009: 359). Dinah’s situation is important in terms of a woman’s right to have a say so that she can exist with her own identity and express herself both at home and in society. It can be deduced from Benia and Dinah’s relationship that the image of a woman who has been “confined to the cultural level of animal life in providing the male with sexual outlet and exercising the animal functions of reproduction and care of the young” (Millett, 2016: 119) is transformed into a self-assured, independent, productive and active woman in the revised story.

Dinah does not just play games with her brother Joseph, who is her best friend. They also tell each other stories from time to time. Dinah explains that these stories are not always innocent ones about gods and goddesses or families: “I thought the women's stories were prettier, but Joseph preferred our father's tales. Our talk was not usually so lofty. We shared the secret of sex and begetting, and laughed, aghast, to think of our parents behaving like the dogs in the dust” (Diamant, 2009: 118). The fact that a woman’s talking to her brother about sexuality and fertility also seems to destroy the conventional beliefs in a patriarchal society. The writer creates a modern rewriting with this aspect.

Diamant also strengthens the feminine style of writing by stressing the flaws of the male or by laughing at the superiority of the male glorified by the patriarchal order. For instance, Leah and Dinah make fun of Laban when they talk about him:

*He was like an ox, your grandfather.’*

*‘Like a post,’ I said.*

*‘Like a cooking stone,’ said my mother.*

*‘Like a goat turd,’ I said.*



*My mother shook her finger at me as though I were a naughty child, but then she laughed out loud, for raking Laban over the coals was great sport among his daughters* (Diamant, 2009: 41).

Jacob's fourth wife, Zilpah's thoughts about men are also important in terms of mentioning the flaws of men and reversing the male/female dichotomy. Zilpah describes men as hairy, vulgar, and half-human. She says, "women needed men to make babies and to move heavy objects, but otherwise she didn't understand their purpose, much less appreciate their charms" (Diamant, 2009: 34-35). Diamant does not allow women to glorify men. In the story of the circumcision of Leah's son, Reuben, women laugh at the penis, which is the symbol of power, fertility, and male sexuality: "The women rolled around on the mats, holding their sides, laughing about the tender equipment that men carried between their legs" (Diamant, 2009: 72). Leah questions the custom of circumcision with this comment: "The flap of skin on the penis meant nothing to her. ... Once, Leah threatened to take a bit of charred wood and draw a face upon Reuben's sex, so that when Jacob retracted the foreskin, he would drop his knife in wonder" (Diamant, 2009: 71-72). Diamant uses a feminine style of writing that gets rid of male-dominated language patterns.

For Diamant, it is unrealistic that Leah is ugly and a traitor and Jacob is indifferent to a woman who has given him six children. She also changes the statements that define women as imperfect. Unlike Leah's delicate eyes in Genesis, her "vision was perfect" in the novel. Dinah's "mother's eyes were not weak, or sick, or rheumy. The truth is, her eyes made others weak and most people looked away rather than face them—one blue as lapis, the other green as Egyptian grass" (Diamant, 2009: 32). Diamant reverses this feature of Leah and transforms her deformation into a power. While Jacob marries Rachel, the girls switch places on the wedding day and he marries Leah. In Genesis, Laban, the father of the girls, ask for this as according to tradition, the younger daughter cannot be married before the elder one is married. In *The Red Tent*, Leah and Rachel replace since Rachel fears marriage. Diamant not only breaks down traditional stereotypes such as the decision of women's marriage by the elders of the family but also shows that it is natural for a woman to be afraid of getting married.

Another strategy used by the writer is to focus on sisterhood and female friendships. Negative relations such as rivalry and jealousy between women are the greatest evil that the patriarchal culture imposes on women. Cixous remarks that men have caused women to be enemies to each other: "Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs" (Cixous, 1976: 878). In the novel, the author also overturns this situation and stresses that close female friendships can be established, even though they cannot get along from time to time. In this novel, the writer honors the bonds between women. Finding remarks that "Diamant looks back to the radical feminism of the 1970s in proclaiming the value of sisterhood and foregrounding 'womencenteredness' (2004: 45). With the birth of Dinah, her mothers forget all the problems and disagreements between them. Dinah is born both as a strong bond between them and as a woman who will keep their memory alive. Besides, in the red tent, women get together, celebrate their womanhood, birth, and death, purify their bodies and soul during the menstrual cycle and tell new stories to each other. It shows the reader that women in the tent establish more intimate relationships. The tent functions as a kind of matriarchal village and a space of freedom. While men rule the family and society outside the tent, it is only women who set up the rules inside the tent. In this sense, the red tent symbolizes feminine strength, the harmony of women with one another in it, and nature itself. Although there is no tent or menstrual hut in the Bible, Diamant records that according to her research, it was seen in many pre-modern cultures of the world, from Native Americans to Africans as a common feature (Diamant, 2019b). She probably wants to create something original and special for women's

menstrual tents. Diamant may have designed the red tent so that Dinah and the women in the family would have a room of their own that gives them privacy, leisure time, and independence as Woolf states in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) while criticizing women's situation in the literary tradition. Like Woolf's belief that women must have "a room of her own if she is to write fiction (1977: 7)" in a patriarchal world, they have the red tent as their private place to tell stories to each other. It is clear that in the tent, women keep their stories and voices alive. When the writer is asked why she especially chose Dinah's story, she answers "giving her a voice was important to me. Virginia Woolf writes about women's silence in *A Room of One's Own*. I chose to write INTO that silence" (Diamant, 2020).<sup>2</sup> According to her, instead of accepting what they have been dictated to, women need to build self-esteem, find a room for themselves, and speak loudly. To state the obvious, Diamant has been influenced by Woolf, and she does not want Dinah to be called a victim, so she writes a rich story about her.

Diamant's protagonist is embraced by magnificent women who speak up. When Laban tries to make a deal to marry his daughters to Jacob, Dinah's grandmother, Adah, tries to protect her daughters by saying "no—'We are not barbarians who give children to wed'" (Diamant, 2009: 48). It is clear that in the novel, women who are active, confident, strong, and awake have taken the place of women who believe that being passive, victimized, ruined, or asleep makes them merry (Dworkin, 1974). When Leah is born, the midwife shouts that a witch has come about and should be drowned because she can bring a curse on the family but Adah curses her tongue and shouts "'Show me my daughter,' said Adah, in a voice so loud and proud even the men outside could hear her" (Diamant, 2009: 32) Contrary to the desire to have male heirs in the sacred texts, Diamant reinterprets the birth of girls as to be welcomed with joy. Dinah's underlining that mothers want daughters so that they can "keep their memories alive" can be interpreted as the writer's rebelling against gender stereotyping through her subverting male-centered text (Diamant, 2009: 24). Therefore, Dinah weaves the myth, told by men, from a different perspective for herself and her mothers.

Although her brothers are older than Dinah, she always takes on the role of the group leader and main storyteller while playing games. Dinah develops the midwifery skill she learned from her aunt, Rachel, and uses it wisely to continue to establish relationships with women throughout her life and, most importantly, to exist as a woman and as an individual. According to the conditions of the time, Dinah does what women cannot do; as the only daughter in the family, she manages to get ahead of Jacob's twelve sons with her skills. Furthermore, she falls in love and does not hesitate to have sexual intercourse with the man she loves. After her husband and family are murdered, she goes to Egypt to establish a new life and becomes famous as a very good midwife. In a word, the voiceless female character in the Hebrew myth is revived as a smart, ambitious, capable, and resilient woman. In the novel, the women, Diamant recreates, reveal themselves as subjects decentralizing the man's power and knowledge. She does not treat women as secondary to men and pays special attention to them by creating sophisticated individuals.

### Conclusion

This research has focused on the deconstruction and reinterpretation of a Hebrew myth, creating a contemporary text from a female perspective who does not say a single word in the book of *Genesis*. It has been determined that the reproduced myths present a multifaceted mosaic instead of a one-way perspective. In this context, Diamant's novel has been analyzed through the lens of postmodern feminist criticism within the framework of the concept of feminine writing. It has been emphasized that as Cixous defends, women reveal their own

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication through e-mail on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

suppressed history when they discover new ways of writing that can break the male-dominated rules and women must speak about themselves and their bodies, stating that there is no limit to women's creativity. Therefore, it has been inferred that when women speak and write about themselves and their bodily desires, false images of women can be destroyed, and masculine meanings and symbols will collapse.

In conclusion, by rewriting the story of Dinah, Jacob's only daughter, Anita Diamant has shown that men give little or no place to women in their stories, whereas women's stories are more complex than one might think. She has portrayed Dinah and other female characters as active and self-assertive agents. Weaving a long and more distinct narrative than the biblical text, the author has transformed hierarchical structures of patriarchal discourse through her textuality and female characters' sexuality in *The Red Tent*. The analysis of the rewritten text reveals that feminine writing liberates the female body and its sexual experiences from the authority of androcentric ideology. Additionally, it has been observed that the textual strategies, used by Diamant, to subvert the patriarchal order in the *Old Testament* myth and to create a gynocentric myth, bring forwards alternative definitions of female identity apart from motherhood and housewifery.

### Information Note

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics. This study does not require ethics committee approval.

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