

**Storytelling: Ritual, Catharsis and Healing  
in the Jewish American Experience**

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Since this a study on storytelling and stories, the formalized oral histories of women that link generations of cultural and material bonds, I would like to start with a personal anecdote. Growing up with children from many different cultural backgrounds (and, typically, not savoring or cherishing the experience at the time), I was struck by a trend that marked my Jewish girl friends from all my other friends: These girls referred to their cousins as *yengemin kızı* (my patrilineal or matrilineal uncle's wife's daughter) whereas the non-Jewish children would all say *amcamın/ dayımın kızı* (my patrilineal or matrilineal uncle's daughter). I kept wondering why they insisted on making this "mistake." Certainly, it was one's male relatives or those related directly by blood that were "actual relatives." A "yenge," however, was neither of these. It took me a long time to realize that my Jewish friends were consistently using a preference for matrilineal rather than patrilineal bonding because of their internalized cultural differences.

Stories and storytelling is an integral part of minority fiction produced by women. Black writers (Alice Walker, Gayle Jones, Margaret Walker), Jewish American writers (Tillie Olsen, Marge Piercy, Kim Chernin, Anzia Yezierska), and Chinese American writers (Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Fae Myenne Ng) have used stories and storytelling in such a way as to join together themes from a shared past with reminiscences of elements which have traditionally opposed and victimized the women storytellers. As the stories unfold, the narrators or the storytellers discover a deep bonding that connects them to their cultural, maternal or psychic backgrounds. Invariably, this is an enriching, albeit bitter experience.

This study aims at scrutinizing two novels by Jewish American women writers who use storytelling in similar ways and for similar purposes. Both novels, Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House* and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* relate the lives and times of four generations of Russian Jews who have escaped from the "shtetl"--a Jewish village or ghetto in Tzarist Russia--and have arrived in New York full of stories of California, "a place where it never rained, where children never got sick" (Chernin 23).

Both novels are autobiographical and narrated in the first person singular. Again, in both novels, the generations and incidents are linked together by the daughters who have taken on the writing down of the oral histories of their families, formalizing and sharing these histories with the world. In fact, the subtitles of both novels are similar: "A Daughter's Story" (Chernin) and "A struggle between a father of the Old World and daughter of the New" (Yeziarska). In both novels, the oldest generation of newcomers from Russia are very traditional and resist the ways of the New World. The men of this generation are tyrannical: Yeziarska's father is a Talmudic scholar who studies the Torah and makes his wife and four daughters slave away inside and outside the home so he can have the time to practice his pious existence. Chernin's grandfather always beats his wife and finally breaks her spirit (38).

The newcomers are blinded by the dazzle of the American Dream as soon as they set foot on American soil:

I was happy with America. No, it was something more. I enamored. In the apartment, there was running water, a toilet inside. My father bought us clothes. In America, everything was new. There were pavements on the street. It was just like Zayde said: There were no old people in America. There was more sun in America. Everything was painted in America. We were in love with this shining world. (Chernin 36).

The Yeziarska family shows similar reactions although they are much poorer. As soon as the girls find jobs and start handing over their wages to the family, they start buying pots and pans, towels, spoons and forks. They constantly compare their living conditions with those of others and become a part of consumer culture immediately.

There are various exceptional storytellers in Chernin's family. Celia can bewitch her audience by her fantastic stories. "With Celia it was impossible to tell what was real and what was invented. It was even better than going to the theater. She could tell stories like no one could tell stories" (69). The family feels that Celia is an artist. To the author, Kim Chernin, the stories her aunt Celia and her mother tell are part of the mythical childhood in the shtetl. "If Celia had grown up in the shtetl, she would have known the way of her own embellishments reached back, through an unbroken tradition, to the first tales of the Hebrew people" (Chernin 79). Her aunt's outlandish stories remind Chernin of the tale of the matriarch Sarah, connecting the women of this family to the earliest storytellers of the Jewish tradition.

As Kim Chernin relates the stories her own mother used to tell, she is aware of the fact that the oral tradition is transformed to words on paper. To Kim's mother, the written story is not as trustworthy as the spoken one: "She (mother) would never rely upon the unchanging quality of the written word" (122). Yet, she is proud that her own daughter is now a writer and records her mother's stories to be shared with

thousands of people. She is also conscious that she is handing the torch over to Kim who will continue the tradition of storytelling:

'One day we'll be done with this' she says. 'My whole life will be in the story. And then we'll have to start all over again. But this time you will be telling. Everything I don't know about you. It's too bad you sent Larissa [Kim's daughter] away for the summer. These stories are also for Larissa. Who her grandmother is, who her mother is, for a fifteen-year-old girl, what could be more important?' (Chernin 122)

In fact, that is exactly what happens: In *In My Mother's House*, the first eight stories belong to Kim's mother Rose, the last three stories are from Kim herself. When Kim is finished, she is a new person; her relationship with her mother and daughter takes on a new meaning.

Storytelling is very important in Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers*. Mother's stories of old glory, nostalgically relating to the old world, tell Sara, the narrator, that the family has seen better days before they arrived in the lower east side of New York. Some of these stories are about her wedding arrangements. "Once mother got started she couldn't stop herself, telling more and more. She was like drunk with the memories of old times," (31) says Sara, the narrator. The customs of the old Russian ghetto are also transferred through mother's stories.

There is a noticeable difference between the stories told by men and women in *Bread Givers*. While women's stories are about practical matters, customs and ceremonies, the men's stories are from "the Songs of Solomon" (34), Greek fairy tales (69), or from *Torah* or the *Old Testament* (202). To Sara, these stories seem lifeless, full of double standards or lacking in worldly wisdom. She cannot relate to them as easily and whole-heartedly as she does to her mother's stories. This is possibly because men's stories put down women. "Only through a man has a woman an existence. Only through a man can a woman enter Heaven" (Yeziarska 137).

Storytelling is a ritual between Kim Chernin and her mother Rose Chernin in *In My Mother's House*. Over a period of eight years, Kim records the stories her mother tells. Rose has a way of telling these stories in ritualistic tones, words and atmospheres. Even the quiet moments she builds into the story are repeated: "Here she breaks off and frowns at me. But I expect this. I have heard the story so many times before and am familiar with all its ritual interruptions" (123). Through these ritualistic moments mother and daughter iron out their differences, sometimes getting entangled in bitter arguments that have a way of repeating like the stories. Rose's and Kim's stories do more than relate personal and social history: they act as emotionally loaded rituals that lead to the final severing of the umbilical cord between the two women:

In retrospect, I see that it was a separation ritual, a way we had evolved to speak the central issue between us. For, whatever else we shouted or declaimed, a single idea was at the heart of our quarrel. I mean of course the fact that we thought different and experienced the world differently. That we were no longer the same person. (Chernin 282)

Storytelling leads to catharsis in both novels. In *In My Mother's House*, Rose, the mother, gives the signal that she will tell Kim a story that she (Rose) has been avoiding. Kim understands that this will be the story of her (Kim's) sister Nina who died of Hodgkin's disease when she was sixteen years old. It is a trauma that Rose cannot deal with at this stage in her life, so, trying to evade pain, she changes the story to their visit to USSR in the 1930s. She evades the story of her daughter's painful death as long as it is possible:

'Sometimes, when you tell a story you go back. Even the dead ones come alive again.' And then she says, 'So, Nina... is riding on your father's shoulders.' And I realize, from the steady tone in which she speaks, that in our silence, together, we have crossed into the story. (Chernin 126)

Nina's disease makes the whole family suffer with her. After the mother relates the terrible story to Kim, the latter has the courage to go back to those black days in her memory. She was a six-year-old child when Nina died, and because the grief was too difficult to come to terms with, she had blocked out the incident from her recollections. After hearing her mother tell the sad story, Kim gains spirit enough to return to those dark memories of her childhood and relive the guilt, the sorrow, the rebellion of a child faced with bereavement (Chernin 199- 203).

A similar cleansing and falling of chains is observed in *Bread Givers*. When Sara is sharing her past with her principal, Mr. Seelig, they find out that they are from the same country, from villages only a few miles apart. Finding someone of almost identical background is a source of pride and happiness for Sara so she softens up and for the first time is not on her guard with a man. This brings a strange novelty to Sara's behavior:

We fell into a silence. All the secret places of my heart opened at the moment. And then the whole story of my life poured itself out of me to him. Father, Mother, my sisters... As I talked my whole dark past dropped away from me. Such a sense of release! Now I could go on - I could never again be lonely! (Yeziarska 287)

Through storytelling, Sara achieves a cleansing of her soul which will eventually lead to her reconciliation with her past.

Storytelling also helps establish bonds with the cultural and personal past. Kim's mother Rose always reminds her that if you forget your past you become nothing. A good example of this is Rose's story of Celia, her sister, who changed her name to Sylvia so people would not know she came from a Jewish family. She also made up lies about belonging to an aristocratic European, non-Jewish family. However,

Celia becomes insane and dies. To Rose, Celia's tragedy is based on her cutting off of her ties from her true background: "A woman without a people behind her. That was her tragedy" (Chernin 80). Sara's mother's stories about their Old World experiences in *Bread Givers* establish a similar bond that binds Sara to her family and ancestors. During graduation, she writes down the story of her family, how they relate to the Old World and the New. Her story is her triumph: she wins the first prize, a thousand dollars, and this money is her first step toward becoming a writer. So, through her storytelling, Sara achieves both the comfort of establishing her history, and the initial push that will make her a well-known literary figure of her time.

Storytelling is also a way of overcoming estrangement, achieving reconciliation and healing in both novels. Sara in *Bread Givers* finally forgives her father: she is now mature enough to forgive the old tyrant (296). This reconciliation is "vital to the daughter's individual development" (Rosinski 287). Kim Chernin also reaches a reconciliation with her mother through their complicated rituals of storytelling (294). That is also the moment they achieve understanding and forgiveness. And that is also the moment when pseudo-myths established by non-communication are finally shattered, and the coldness and estrangement between mother and daughter melt away. The two women "communicate continually and intimately, even when they disagree" (Bloom 299).

In both novels the stories told by the women are the most valuable possessions the women have. Stories connect them to their heritage, stories span the gap between the generations, stories help them become strong and healthy. Kim Chernin's mother says it so well: "Heirlooms we don't have in our family. But stories we've got" (304).

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