SCRIPTA JUDAICA CRACOVIENSIA
Vol. 11 (2013) pp. 161–174
doi:10.4467/20843925SJ.13.014.1310

Self-sacrificing and/or Overbearing: the Jewish Mother in the Cultural Imagination

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Key words: American Jewish culture and literature, the Jewish Mother stereotype

Abstract: Given the historical proximity of Polish and Jewish groups, it is possible to identify their mutual interconnectedness. This paper presents one such example of the stereotypical Jewish Mother, in Israel known as a "Polish woman," both in its sociohistorical and cultural aspect. Drawing from the theory of gendered and stereotypical representations, author traces a changing portrayal of the Jewish Mother on her way from the ghetto penury to middle-class affluence. Embodied by popular characters such as Molly Goldberg, the Jewish mother also became a target of bitter criticism, best rendered in the depiction of Sophie Portnoy—the iconic protagonist of Philip Roth's novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967). Feminist re-readings of this popular stereotype offer an interesting insight into its construction and try to explain its viability.

My paternal and maternal family come from the Eastern Borderlands, which were populated by a mixture of ethnic groups: Poles, Byelorussians, Karaims, and Jews. Both my aunt and mother, who were then little girls, recollect going with their mothers to visit a Jewish seamstress, a Jewish shoemaker (who made shoes for a deferred payment), a Jewish shopkeeper (who ordered special fabrics for my grandmother) and the familiar figure of the Jewish peddler (hawking pots and pans, and sharpening knives). Jewish crafts were generally appreciated because of their high professional reputation and reliability. My relatives remember the multiethnic neighborhoods of Soły and Wiszniewo, which were populated by Polish and Jewish neighbors, even if they rarely socialized with one another. The Jews from my family's recollections were assimilated, not Orthodox, and were generally without discernible emblems of ethnic identity. I am aware of the fact that a child's perspective is obviously limited and incomplete, but what these Polish children remembered about their pre-World War II Jewish neighbors indicates a fairly peaceful and mutually beneficial co-existence.

While researching my project about the stereotypical representations of Jewish women in American culture, I have observed that many of the features attributed to Jewish mothers can also be found in Polish mothers, at least in those I have come to know.[1] Their unrelenting emphasis on food and a fear of ever feeling hungry, a myriad of "be carefuls," which are to protect a child from the dangers of everyday life, and the insist-

[1] In Israel, the stereotypical American "Jewish Mother" is known as "Isha Polania," or Polish woman.

ence on constant contact with grown-up children testify to the Jewish and Polish mothers' shared characteristics. The proximity and long cohabitation of Jewish and Polish communal groups must have resulted in their mutual influence; a process which was subject to the assimilative forces at work in the borderlands. Women, to a larger extent than men, could engage in inter-ethnic contact, normally connected with household duties and child rearing. Maternal and domestic tasks provided a common platform for both Polish and Jewish female cohorts, making exchange of information potentially possible. As the exact measure and history of Polish and Jewish women's reciprocal influence calls for another study, I assume that maternal behaviors are not ethnically specific. Different realizations of maternal love indicate its universal core, at the heart of which lies the well-being of the child. But what if this child, typically male, chooses to convert the mother's image into a stock character which triggers bursts of laughter and general scorn? Suspended between a self-sacrificing martyr and a guilt-producing manipulator, the literary representations of the Jewish mother demonstrate Jewish assimilative anxiety in post-war America as well as the resulting changes in family dynamics and shifting gender roles. Even though these stereotypical images are embedded within the Jewish American cultural milieu, they manage to interrogate the ambivalence of motherhood in general.

Gendered stereotypes

Although reductive and limited in nature, stereotypes allow people to classify new experiences by means of familiar tools. They provide labels, which help to sort out experience in order to form meaningful beliefs. Stereotypes require a social context in which the elements of their characteristics can come into play, allowing one group of people to be categorized against another. Mapping stereotypes may help to address such issues as ethnocentrism, prejudice, and alienation. Stereotypes are the lens through which members of the dominant group can identify their relationship to race, ethnicity, religion, social standing, gender, and age. Although stereotypes are often biased and ignore the diversity within the group, they still reveal much information about the society in question: "stereotyping is complicit in the dynamics of social power; that it is caricaturing of certain social groups, especially of those in subordinate social positions, serves to reinforce both the subordinate positions themselves and the social mythologies that rationalize such acts of social subordination" (Freadman 1993: 109). Moreover, they reflect the system of values and beliefs the society holds as normative and which pertain to those in power.

Gender is a social label whose power comes from the universality of its categorization: the division between men and women being the fundamental one. The term "gender" refers to a simplified and standardized conception, which communicates assumptions about male and female roles (both social and domestic), images and individual or group attributes. The term "gender stereotype" was adopted in the 1970s by feminists in order to distinguish between biological and cultural aspects of "maleness" and "femaleness." In 1979, R.K. Unger introduced a definition of gender to the psychological sciences as "those characteristics and traits socioculturally considered appropriate to males and

females" (1085). Biological approaches to gender indicate differences between the sexes as fundamental to their construction, whereas social theorists refer to societal expectations and cultural traditions as determinants responsible for gender differences. Gender stereotypes refer to a set of beliefs which affect conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity, whereas gender roles are recognized by certain behaviors, which, in turn, furnish the material for stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes are not innate, but culturally conditioned; they are learned, internalized and perpetuated by normative societal structures. Being the products of social activity, they are subject to change alongside the changes in the social structure. The fact that they employ both individual and collective representations allows them to function across racial, ethnic, class, and gender lines, and affect whole groups, regardless of personal beliefs. Mental representations of the world, such as stereotypes, are encoded in memory and later presented and disseminated via diverse vehicles of cultural communication, such as literature, radio, television, film, press, and advertising. The most popular and persistent image related to American Jewish culture is that of the Jewish mother, which has been present in the media since at least the 1950s and still enjoys notable manifestations, albeit significantly altered in comparison to the original prototype.

From the ghetto to the suburb

Probably the most dramatic change in regard to the female role in a Jewish family happened in the 20th century, when Jews began to leave the ethnic ghetto and join the American middle classes. This was a turbulent time not only for the Jews but also for America: the Great Depression of the 1930s inflamed ethnic problems within American society, especially among groups who were competing for the same jobs, anti-Semitism escalated as the Jews were accused of controlling American capital and business, and the tragic fate of European Jews—especially assimilated and successful German Jews—under the Nazi regime shook the American Jews' belief in stability. The outbreak of World War II fueled American anti-Semitic sentiments so much that "during the 1940s from 15 to 24 percent of the American population surveyed defined Jews as a 'menace to America.' When the United States was at war with Germany and Japan, a greater percentage of Americans held negative attitudes toward Jews than toward German or Japanese Americans" (Prell 1999: 125). In order not to aggravate the situation, Jews tended to avoid public disputes and continued to blend into American society so successfully that "in the 1930s [they] began to 'vanish' as subjects from […] American popular culture" (Prell 1999: 127).Their growing financial stability and increased access to middle-class living made it possible for them to move to the suburbs ("the gilded ghettos"), where they "retained their prewar residential patterns of living in close proximity to one another, but they did so by abandoning urban life en masse" (Prell 1999: 157).

Although geographically they became part of the middle classes and as American citizens enjoyed a wide array of professional opportunities, they were still unwelcome to join their Protestant neighbors in social activities. The postwar suburbs witnessed another struggle for Jewish social inclusion, which entailed both intra- and inter-ethnic disputes. More subtle but equally damaging discrimination of Jews took place at uni-

versities (which introduced quotas of admissible Jewish students), on housing estates (which refused Jewish home buyers), in workplaces (which used the ethnic criterion for employment), and through various forms of "gentlemen's agreements," which denied Jewish membership at clubs, fraternities, and sororities.

The shift in female roles in the Jewish family had already started when Jewish immigrants began to adapt to the prevailing bourgeoisie model of female domesticity, according to which women were basically expected to preserve traditional morality, stay religious, and do good deeds; the last of these roles combined Western philanthropy with traditional Jewish charity (*zedakah*). In the Old World, many shtetl wives had to provide for their families, and thus developed "strong personalities and sharp business skills" (Koltun 1976: 273). In American Jewish immigrant narratives, such as Abraham Cahan's "Yekl, A Tale of the New York Ghetto" (1896), Edna Sheklow's memoir *So Talently My Children* (1966), and Shalom Asch's *East River* (1946), we can see female characters portrayed as essential to the survival of the family: "when women's wage earning was still vital to the family, the energetic women who used their skills and ingenuity to help support their families are cast as admirable characters" (Baum, Hyman & Michel 1976: 191). Enterprising Jewish women were depicted as "robust and direct, energetic and independent. Female charm, in the recognized American sense, was not one of their virtues" (Baum, Hyman & Michel 1976: 189). Thereby, they exhibited traits which were in conflict with the model of American wifehood, as it advanced among the middle classes from World War II onwards. This emerging ideal portrayed a wife who was modest about her own needs and, instead, concentrated on her husband's professional and social promotion, but who retained the appearance of a sophisticated lady. As a mother, she had to sacrifice herself for the happiness of her children; however, in no way should she impede their independence. Women who "held on to the old attitudes and attempted to take control of financial matters were seen, at least in literature, as domineering and emasculating – or as laughable" (Baum, Hyman & Michel 1976: 193). The endorsement of feminine qualities of domesticity and refinement, which were aligned with the American cultural ideal of womanhood, and the simultaneous portrayal of women as temperamentally and physically unsuited to do business, exposes the scale of impingement of the dominant American attitude on the Jewish community. The Western, middle-class definition of womanhood imposed on Jewish women a more conservative role than the one they had enjoyed in Eastern Europe. In America, however, Jewish women advanced in education and various forms of entertainment such as the Yiddish theatre, vaudeville, radio, and television.

The common representation of the transitional period between the working mother and the lady of leisure is "the foolish, overdecorated wife of the parvenu. She is a caricature of the real "lady," her pretensions to refinement laughable, and her shallowness and materialism contemptible" (Baum, Hyman & Michel 1976: 199). Mrs. Cohen from Michael Gold's 1930 novel *Jews Without Money* is a good example of such characterization:

> Mrs. Cohen, a fat, middle-aged woman, lay on the sofa. She glittered like an ice-cream parlor. Her tubby legs rested on a red pillow. Her bleached yellow head blazed with diamond combs and rested on a pillow of green. She wore a purple silk waist, hung with yards of tapestry and lace. Diamonds shone from her ears; diamond rings sparkled from every finger. She looked like some vulgar, pretentious prostitute, but was only the typical wife of a Jewish *nouveau riche* (217).

Even though her depiction is most unfavorable, she is not an active participant in the oppressive capitalist system, which Gold criticizes in his novel. What she does is to perform the role that is expected of her: that of the consumer and a lady of leisure: "In spite of the fact that proletarian novels advocate social change by arousing class consciousness, their content is often gender-biased […] they reduce female characters to passive agents who are ensnared in the man's world" (Gasztold 2011: 135).

Conforming to middle-class lifestyle

The two major factors affecting the life of American Jews in the 1940s, the existent threat of anti-Semitism and their acculturated life style, resulted in the shifting of the hub of Jewish culture out of the public sphere toward the realm of domesticity. Jewish men concentrated on work, pursuing white-collar jobs which financially enabled, and later supported, their arrival in the middle classes. Providing was an exclusively male activity, for "man's masculinity was defined in large part by his working and being breadwinner, and […] attaining material success from it" (Cantor 1995: 170). The position of sole breadwinner consolidated their authority over the family. For an aspiring Jew, "the first status symbol on the Lower East Side of New York was a nonworking wife" (Cantor 1995: 172). Should a man's wife go to work, it signaled her husband's financial incompetence and lack of business skills. The wife's duty, in turn, was to ensure that the Jewish household did not fall short of the American one, in either idea or design. In other words, it must be run in a manner that reflected her husband's affluence and prosperity. Women were expected to find fulfillment in pursuing the roles of wives and mothers, and behave like "ladies of leisure"—now that they were freed from household chores by servants. "Their role as ladies must complement their husband's financial position; by conducting themselves properly, they become assets" (Baum 199). As the Jewish father became associated with work outside the family, the Jewish mother, who had no direct access to production and wealth, except through her husband, concentrated on domestic issues such as raising the children and performing household tasks. Her prowess as a good housewife matched her husband's professional accomplishments and completed the picture of an acculturated and successful family that had come a long way since its immigrant origins.

The moment the suburban Jewish family became an emblem of successful acculturation and assimilation marks the shift from an immigrant to an assimilationist position. Symbolically rendered in the opening line of the 1953 novel *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow—"I'm an American, Chicago born"—the protagonist's statement removes all doubt about his national identity. But the move from the margins towards the mainstream also channeled the Jewish anxieties that accompanied their newly acquired social position. Financial success was important, but it did not ensure the acceptance of the American middle-classes, which were still reluctant to embrace the newcomers. Once the unwelcoming attitude towards the Jewish neighbors became obvious, the brunt of criticism directed at the stereotypical Jewish mother came to represent all that still hindered American acceptance of Jews. In other words, the stereotyped Jewish mother conveyed both the worst traits of the Old World and the major obstacles to Jewish as-

similation in the New World. Thus, the figure of the Jewish mother became the focus of an intra-ethnic frustration and the source of the leading stereotype of the post-World War II period.

Beloved and criticized: cultural representations of the Jewish Mother

Not all cultural representations of the Jewish mother carried a negative bias and criticism, as there was one Jewish mother who became a beloved mother of many Americans of non-Jewish origin. Gertrude Berg was an actress, writer, and producer of a popular radio and, from 1949, television sitcom, *The Goldbergs*, which aired from 1929 to 1962. She created one of the most popular female characters of Jewish origin—Molly Goldberg. Combining the sentimentalized Yiddishe mama with the life wisdom and common sense of a knowledgeable matriarch, she captivated audiences across ethnic and religious borders, becoming the epitome of an open-hearted and caring American mother. Portraying the Goldbergs as a Jewish, but not too Jewish, family, she skillfully merged Yiddish inflected speech with general problems related to a working class background: financial worries, paying the rent, problems with employment, food, children, health, and managing the closest and most distant members of the family. The deliberate omission of potentially inflammable political and racial issues tailored the show to suit a gamut of American tastes. This is why its representation of a "typical" working-class Jewish family is not exactly accurate, as it eschews family feuds, divorces, religious concerns, mental illnesses, racial prejudice and the debilitating effects of physical work. In the relationship with her children, she is nothing like Portnoy's mother; Molly is a respectful advisor who allows the children to reach their own decisions, and a patient observer of their—sometimes problematic—maturity. Good-natured, humane and smart, Molly manages to peacefully resolve all of her own, and her neighbors', problems, always promoting moral values over material ones, thus proving that "immigrant mothers did not have to be left behind as Jews moved forward, nor would they pollute Judaic values with materialistic concerns. With mothers like Molly reliably steering the course, immigrants and other working-class citizens could make it in America" (Antler 2007: 48). Molly Goldberg was the prototype of later, more distorted, representations of Jewish motherhood.

The overall image of the stereotypical Jewish wife/mother was predominantly pejorative. She was accused of excessive consumption, "associated aggressively with wanting and demanding. Status success, and suburbanization were some of the demands she placed upon her husband" (Prell 1999: 145), who was presented as a victim of her insatiable needs, or somebody who fruitlessly tried to satisfy her gargantuan craving for accumulation. Her lack of moderation also revealed itself in the unequal way she tended to the needs of the family. She

> suffocated her family, but especially her children, with food and nurturance that made giving and receiving a poisonous act. As an excessive giver, she never wanted or received anything directly, but she was highly manipulative. Her name was synonymous with guilt, her second attribute. Her demands were impossible to meet because she wanted what usually seemed impossible to give—total loyalty. [...] [S]he was often portrayed as naïve, stupid, or hopelessly out of touch with the world of her children (Prell 1999: 145).

She was impossible to please, like in the joke: "What did the waiter ask the group of dining Jewish mothers? Is ANYTHING all right?" Finally, she was seen as "crass, bullying, asexual, antisexual […], she overfeeds everyone, and obsesses about digestion and elimination" (Pogrebin 1991: 260). In short, the Jewish Mother stereotype has become a universally recognized metaphor for emotional harassment whose fictional life has been perpetuated by means of cultural and scholarly representations.

Acquisition was an important element of assimilation, and women spearheaded the process, which "provided immigrants with the markers of American identity and social mobility—from American food products to a piano for the parlor" (Hyman 1995: 98). When Jews were moving to middle-class districts, they decorated their homes so that they would match their non-Jewish neighbors. At the same time, excessive consumption was seen as undesirable and corruptive of traditional American values. Ostentatious materialism was regarded by Protestant neighbors as tantamount to a lack of sophistication and crudeness. In the transitional period of social mobility Jewish mothers were both encouraged and chastised for buying, depending on who formulated the argument: the margins, or the mainstream, respectively. In both cases it was the woman who was held responsible for criticism: if she does not spend, her whole household and life style would be regarded as not up to her American neighbors' standards—the evidence of Jewish failure to assimilate. A fiasco to successfully emulate the aspiring model had far-reaching consequences, one of which was a disapproval expressed by her husband who had been working hard to ensure the family had the means to match their peer group. However, if she spent money and paraded the latest, material symbols of affinity to middle-class living, her non-Jewish neighbors criticized her for her excess and vulgarity, and she would be deemed extravagant and reckless—again a signal of her—and by proxy Jewish—failed acculturation, and the reason for social ostracism.

Between sons and daughters

In the shtetl, the mother did not depend on the children's success to affirm her social position, as she herself was also the provider. In the American milieu, where she was confined to the realm of domesticity, her self-esteem was connected with her children's career, especially as she bore the responsibility for socializing them. "The shtetl defined success in terms of Jewish values: that she or he became a mentsch, and a good Jew. In America success meant the son's material achievement and status and the daughter's 'good marriage'" (Cantor 1995: 209). This was why mothers encouraged their sons to pursue education and a professional career, preferably that of the proverbial doctor or lawyer. A daughter, however, needed education only inasmuch as it would enhance her prospects for matrimony. This is how the mother from Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967) talks about her daughter: "The child is no genius, but then we don't ask the impossible. God bless her, she works hard, she applies herself to her limits, and so whatever she gets is all right" (2).[2] Expectations towards Jewish daughters were modest, and

[2] All references are to this edition and are cited by page within the text: Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, London: Corgi Books, 1971.

a mother's goal was to "mold her daughter into a marriageable female" (Cantor 1995: 220), rather than insist on her academic or professional career. The mother's task was arduous, for the established canon of beauty was defined in non-Jewish terms: straight blonde hair, a small nose, and a slim figure. A young woman on the brink of matrimony also had to appear gentle, reserved, and not as outspoken as Jewish women can, allegedly, be. All in all, in order to become worthy of man's attention, she should come closest to the American ideal of beauty. Only social invisibility made her desirable, and it was her mother's job to make sure that she arrived at this target.

In regard to her daughter's upbringing, the Jewish mother faced conflicting motives. Teaching her daughter subservience and docility might secure a desirable match with a prominent gentleman, but it would shrink her daughter's chances of becoming an independent-minded and self-motivated person. Moreover, fashioning her physical appearance and self-expression in a way that erases Jewish traits, for example, by having the proverbial nose job, or dyeing dark hair blonde and straightening frizzy hair, might ensure her success at assimilation and attract wealthy suitors, but it would also query the survival of Jewish values and traditions—in short, the survival of Judaism. The mother's role was to balance her daughter's personal happiness and the expectations imposed on her by her diasporic legacy. Especially as for many Jewish families acculturation resulted in lessening the ties with Judaism and the diminishing role of rabbis in the lives of middle-class Jews. Therefore, the task of maintaining the Jewish tradition was delegated to the mother, as she already bore the brunt of responsibility for socializing her children. Any failure to do so would be attributed to her deficiency as a good mother and good Jewess. The daughter's rejection of maternal authority was more ambivalent, and less common, because of the same gender, which creates a strong familial bond, and societal expectations that targeted women regardless of their age. The daughter's negation of maternal values was directed against the concept of motherhood as the only socially approved itinerary available to women. For daughters, the mother figure embodied the restraints to personal and social development, which are grounded in the gender hierarchy, rather than in the particular mother-daughter relationship. Joyce Antler confirms: "Jewish mothers as presented by Jewish daughters are often troubled and troubling, but they are rarely the extreme caricatures given to us by men" (8-9).

As long as the daughter is to be groomed for marriage, which releases her from parental control, a mother's relationship with her son does not wither with his maturity. The Jewish mother is decried for her fixation on her son, for whom no woman is good enough. She infantilizes her son no matter how old he is, and sees him as somebody who is in constant need of motherly attention. The stereotypical Jewish mother, Sophie Portnoy, complains about her adolescent son: "the A student, who his own mother can't say poopie to any more, he's such a *grown-up*" (24). Her love creates a bond that is going to last forever: "Who is going to stay with Mommy forever and ever? Who is it who goes with Mommy wherever in the whole wide world Mommy goes?" (50). Thomas Sowell explains the Jewish mother's special care for her sons as a result of the trauma they experienced in the Pale of Settlement, where Jewish boys were kidnapped and forcefully conscripted into the army, in which they had to serve for the next 25 years: "understandable in view of the Jewish experience in eastern Europe, where Jewish children who wandered off might never be seen again… The life pattern of centuries was not readily

broken in America" (82). Although the mother never asks directly for love, she expects her son to express his gratitude since she is ready to sacrifice her happiness and overlook her own desires for the benefit of her beloved son. By installing in her son's mind a feeling of irreparable guilt, she manages to control his life and ascertains his conformity.

Sophie Portnoy as the stereotypical Jewish mother

Paradoxically, it is her son-author who will often present her in a stereotypical and wry way, as do Henry Roth in *Call It Sleep* (1934), Bruce Jay Freedman in *A Mother's Kisses* (1964), Dan Greenburg in *How To Be a Jewish Mother* (1964), Clifford Odets in *Awake and Sing!* (1935), Wallace Markfield in *Teitlebaum's Window* (1970), and Philip Roth in *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). The Jewish mother, whose sacrifice was appreciated and welcomed on the way to assimilation, was later viewed as domineering and oppressive. The opening words of Philip Roth's novel show how important the mother figure was for the protagonist: "She was so deeply imbedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise" (1). Alex is the apple of his mother's eye: "Of me, the heir to her long Egyptian nose and clever babbling mouth, of me my mother would say, with characteristic restraint, 'This *banditt*? He doesn't even have to open a book—'A' in everything. Albert Einstein the Second!" (2). Mother "is vying with twenty other Jewish women [from the same apartment building] to be the patron saint of self-sacrifice" (15). She fills her life with baking, grating her own horse-radish, sewing, knitting, darning, ironing, watching the butcher "to be certain that he didn't forget to put her chopped meat through the kosher grinder" (11), and lighting candles for the dead. "She is never ashamed of her house" (12); "where health and cleanliness are concerned, germs and bodily secretions, she will not spare herself and sacrifice others" (11). Her love is overpowering when she smothers her son with attention:

> Open your mouth. Why is your throat red? Do you have a headache you're not telling me about? You're not going to any baseball game, Alex, until I see you move your neck. Is your neck stiff? Then why are you moving it that way? You ate like you were nauseous, are you nauseous? Well, you ate like you were nauseous (36).

Both Alex's parents are presented as "outstanding producers and packagers of guilt" (39), but it is his mother who is "a master really at phrasing things just the right way to kill you" such as "I don't love you any more, not a little boy who behaves like you do" (14-15). The upbringing in a postwar Jewish home involves a whole set of rules and regulations: "The hysteria and the superstition! The watch-its and the be-carefuls! You mustn't do this, you can't do that—hold it! don't you're breaking an important law!" (37). That is why Alex blames his parents for becoming "morbid and hysterical and weak" (40): "this is my life, my only life, and I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke—*only it ain't no joke*!" (39-40). Alex Portnoy blames his Jewish mother for his impotence and all other misfortunes which happen to him, and, in consequence, decides to avoid all Jewish women, a strategy whose aim is to ensure his happiness. Consequently, he pursues gentile women as the objects of his love—the exact

opposite of his mother in terms of appearance, speech, manners, and worldview. Thus, he parallels an assimilative path for immigrant Jews on which a marriage to a non-Jewish woman was seen as the final step and a reward for his successful assimilation.

As the father figure is virtually transparent and yields no formal control or authority, the Jewish mother stereotype testifies to the failure of traditional patriarchy in American Jewish acculturated families in the post-war period. The Jewish father took little active part in raising his children because he was mainly a provider: "This man, my father, is off somewhere making money, as best he is able" (49). Alex refers to him as the man with whom his mother sleeps and who "lives with us at night and on Sunday afternoons. My father they say he is" (49). The father's ambition is to maintain his family's middle-class life style, which usually comes down to providing financial security:

> In that ferocious and self-annihilating way in which so many Jewish men of his generation served their families, my father served my mother, my sister Hannah, but particularly me. Where he had been imprisoned, I would fly: that was his dream. Mine was its corollary: in my liberation would be his—from ignorance, from exploitation, from anonymity (7).

His family's well-being is his personal reward, even if he had imagined his life differently. The post-war comic representation of the Jewish family differs from the American model in portraying "the father [who] is weak and almost invisible, the mother [who] is dominating and all-powerful while the son assumes the ambiguous role of a glorious victim […] of his mother's solicitude" (Stora-Sandor: 137).

Anxiety of assimilation and the Jewish mother stereotype

The second generation of American-born and acculturated Jews no longer needs a controlling mother who gives herself over to her children and demands reciprocation. The jokes about the Jewish mother started when the children—mostly the second generation of American-born sons—no longer needed her concern. "She is charged both with expressing too much love, thus delaying the son's individuation, and with expressing too much criticism, thus undermining his self-confidence" (Ravits 2000: 7). The mother's unrelenting care was perceived as tyranny, she was "the all-engulfing nurturer who devours the very soul with every spoonful of hot chicken soup she gives, whose every shakerful of salt contains a curse" (Duncan 1980: 231). And what better way to challenge her, if not laughter. The jokes spread the stereotype of the nagging, Jewish mother beyond ethnic borders providing common ground for Jewish and non-Jewish men: the figure of an oppressive mother with whom any man could identify, and the common representation, which could jeopardize masculinity. "A crucial ingredient in this phenomenon was the misogynist message that coded unacceptable behavior as female rather than Jewish" (Antler 2007: 143). Jewish culture allowed men to be emotionally expressive, which in terms of American manhood was seen as a sign of weakness.

> Deprived of political independence and, in most places, of the right to bear arms, Jewish men denigrated physical prowess as a cultural ideal. Instead, they cultivated intellectual and spiritual pursuits. They expressed their masculinity in the synagogue and in the house of study, not on the battlefield (Hyman 1995b: 25).

Hence, the Jewish mother stereotype passes from marginal—distinctively Jewish—to mainstream—American discourse introducing masculinity as a common standpoint for Jewish and non-Jewish men. It allowed a mutual identification for Jewish and American representations of manhood, which until then had differed considerably.

In the post-war period acculturated Jews quickly learned that, in spite of their remarkable social ascent, they were still socially ignored by their non-Jewish neighbors. The external indicators of middle-class life, which were relatively easy to acquire in the booming post-war economy, proved not enough to ensure Jewish social inclusion. "The overall economic success of Jews as a class in the United States, the jealousy others have felt over this success, and the discomfort this success creates in Jews who are fearful of living out the stereotype of the 'rich Jews'" (Torton 1992: 93) finds a safety valve for their anxieties in the creation of the stereotype of the Jewish mother. The figure of the wife had long been the subject of Jewish humor, then the Jewish mother became the most popular character of American Jewish jokes until the 1970s. In the 1940s, the sentimentalized Yiddishe Mamma is transformed into a martyr whose willingness to sacrifice everything for her family is only equaled by her talent in inducing her children's guilt and repressing her husband. The key elements of the Jewish mother representation are her labor and activity measured against the amount of pressure she is capable of exerting on her family in order to achieve her goals.

The Jewish mother became the embodiment of the worst—according to non-Jews—traits connected with ethnic identity, especially those which signified her failure at complete assimilation: the Yiddish accent, the ethnic manner, and a lack of understanding of the dominant cultural mores. The more she encouraged her son towards Americanization, the more she herself became alien to him, thus becoming a burden that might hinder his acceptance by mainstream society. As a reminder of his immigrant origins, she becomes the source of his shame and embarrassment: "By virtue of gender and generation, [she] functioned as a scapegoat for self-directed Jewish resentment about minority status in mainstream culture" (Ravits 2000: 4). Pronounced as "being too Jewish" and therefore branded with "Otherness," the Jewish (M)other stereotype marks an important phase in the Jewish transition from immigrant to "native" American status, and reflects in-group self-hatred, misogyny, and anti-Semitism. Undesirable qualities from both American and Jewish backgrounds were channeled into the collective image in which the female aspect coincides with ethnicity. "Roth, like other contemporary male novelists, projected into the Jewish mother the negative features of 'Otherness'—Old World backwardness, loudness, vulgarity, clannishness, ignorance and materialism" (Antler 2007: 143). As the stereotype is ensconced somewhere between minority and the dominant group, it projects a meaning which encompasses both spheres of power. Therefore, as Riv Ellen Prell points out, "scholars of stereotypes … understand them most often to be projections onto the minority of the dominant group's fantasies about its own needs and desires" (Prell 1999: 12). Anxiety, which appears at the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and assimilation, reinforces the sense of Otherness. Consequently, the key to the viability of the Jewish mother stereotype may be located elsewhere: "[s]erving as icons for many of the criticisms of American life-permissiveness, indulgence, and a focus on consumption" (Prell 1999: 162), Jews came to realize that the nature of criticism is not necessarily ethnically or religiously related but represents the anxiety of American society at the time

of its postwar transformation. Having been the latest and most spectacularly successful addition to middle-class society, Jews fell victims to social prejudice, which surfaced at this time of social and cultural changes taking place in America after World War II.

Feminists redefine the Jewish Mother stereotype

The Jewish Mother stereotype as a cultural construct entered American letters in the 1960s, coinciding with the second wave of feminism that swept the country. The women's agenda gained importance together with other social and political movements of the time. Feminist theory provided innovative analytical tools for discussing the Jewish Mother stereotype, combining the study of Jewish tradition with the critical tool offered by the feminist lens. In feminist rhetoric, the Jewish mother stereotype embodies a double oppression: as woman and as ethnic. Such an approach is especially interesting since the majority of literary representations of the popular staple are of male authorship. The cultural resilience of the stereotype can be attributed to its overtly male perspective, which chimed with the dominance of male authors, characterizing the American literary scene of the post-war period (Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud). Hence, the Jewish Mother stereotype is so compelling because it targets two vital elements which are essential to its construction. On the one hand, the female character, both aggressive and selfish, threatens to emasculate male authority and questions gender roles, which are prescribed and sustained by the dominant patriarchy. "[T]he stereotype dovetailed so effectively with archetypes of the dangerous female, usurper of patriarchal power, just when women seemed on the verge of becoming newly dangerous and politicized through the women's movement" (Ravits 2000: 5). On the other hand, the ridicule and scorn accompanying its literary representations and the collection of jokes about the Jewish mother, which are still in circulation, aim to undermine an ethnic woman's authority. "What's the difference between a rottweiler and a Jewish mother?," asks one: "Eventually, the rottweiler lets go." The gender-inflected criticism conveys the message that codes her incongruous behavior as female, whereas her Jewishness reinforces and broadens the stereotype's appeal across social and ethnic barriers, bearing responsibility for its lasting impact on the American consciousness.

Another reason why the Jewish mother stereotype has become so firmly ingrained in the popular imagination may be attributed to the fact that it specifically appeared in those areas where Jewish culture had made a strong impact on mainstream American culture. Jewish entertainers chose the representations of the Jewish Mother as the subject of their repertoire and the aim of their satire. Jewish writers and film-makers used the figure of the Jewish Mother for the purposes of self-mockery, which was meant to ease the anxiety connected with their rapid social advancement. Representatives of stand-up comedy, such as Irwin Corey, the so-called Jewish Borsch Belt Comedians working in the Catskill Mountains resorts, Mel Brooks, Jerry Lewis, Milton Berle, and later filmmakers, such as Woody Allen, exploited and perpetuated the image, translating their anguish into humor. Due to the popularity of their comedy routines, they entered the mainstream culture, becoming a vital, vibrant part of it. In consequence, "the figure of the domineering mother in America came to be labeled specifically as a "Jewish mother" in the public conscious-

ness" (Ravits 2000: 4). The reason why this happened so smoothly may be attributed to the fact that the popular topos attracts misogyny, which is visible in both American and Jewish patriarchies. In Joyce Antler's words: "A far-reaching and effective medium, comedy is in large part responsible for making the negative Jewish mother stereotype so pervasive and disproportionately popular" (Ravits 2000: 5).

Next to the Jewish American Princess, which is a later addition, the Jewish Mother stereotype has become the most popular representation of Jewish women in American culture. Its story is the story of American Jews, whose experiences chronicle their social mobility: from immigration and assimilation, to postwar consumer society and the nascence of feminism. Diverse images of Jewish mothers become a focal point in which Jewish anxieties and worries connected with American success are confronted. Today, even though the circumstances leading to the construction of this stereotype have long lost their grip, the Jewish Mother stereotype continues to appear in the popular media and as a topic of scholarly debate. In so doing, it demonstrates that the elements which contribute to its creation continue to allure contemporary audiences. In other words, the Jewish Mother stereotype manages to respond to social changes across gender and ethnic boundaries in a way that ensures its persistent viability.

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