

FROM COMPLICITY TO SUBVERSION

The Female Subject in Adele Wiseman's Novels

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE FEMALE SUBJECT in Adele Wiseman's novels charts the radical shift from complicity with the patriarchy of orthodox Judaism in *The Sacrifice* (1956) to subversion of that culture in *Crackpot* (1974). Both works describe insular communities whose ideologies rather than their practices reflect a traditional and orthodox Judaism and which participate minimally in the large society. Each novel configures one female character as a whore who exists on the periphery of the community. *The Sacrifice* finally refuses to accommodate the prostitute. An example of "a female character who cannot properly negotiate an entrance into teleological love relations, ones with appropriate ends, a character whose marginalization grows concentrically as the novel moves to the end" (DuPlessis 16), Laiah is murdered for challenging Judaism's patriarchy. In the figure of Hoda, *Crackpot* seeks retribution for Laiah's death and provides a revisionist reading of the earlier text which attempts to recover a place for women within Judaism and fiction. *Crackpot* is written against *The Sacrifice* as a critique where "community and social connectedness are the end of the female quest, not death" (DuPlessis 16).

Wiseman's first novel "sacrifices" a female sensibility to the patriarchal discourse of orthodox Judaism. Primarily a tragedy, *The Sacrifice* is a male-centred text whose prevailing consciousness is that of Abraham. Despite his slaying of Laiah, the narrative is aligned consistently with Abraham, an alliance which is signalled early on through a detailed description of his physical discomfort. As repeated references to his eyes suggest, Abraham's vision, however distorted, will dominate the work:

The train was beginning to slow down again, and Abraham noticed lights in the distance. . . . He tried to close his eyes and lose himself in the thick, dream-crowded stillness, but his eyelids, prickly with weariness, sprang open again. (3)

By focusing on Abraham's perception and his decision to disembark the train, the narrative deliberately and immediately positions him at the centre of the action.

Further, early references to his "throbbing aches" (3), flawed vision, and rash behaviour foreshadow the similar responses which overwhelm Abraham during his murder of Laiah.

Abraham sanctions compliance for women which is evident in his attitude toward Sarah, Ruth, and Laiah. In fact, in the world of *The Sacrifice* if one is female acting is tantamount to sinning. Hence, Abraham endorses his wife's debilitating passivity as an appropriate response to the tragic loss of her elder sons without understanding that she is silenced by the cultural imperative to internalize her tremendous grief, manifested as "spasms" that only "wear themselves out in exhaustion" (50). Chaim Knopp and other male characters respect Sarah for her submissiveness. In defiance of his own loquacious wife, for example, Mr. Plopler wistfully describes Sarah as "such a quiet one" (134). The one time she differs with her husband by correcting his conscious misattribution of a Christian cousin to her side of the family, Sarah does so timorously, speaking softly with "her troubled gaze on her hands in front of her" (125). As her husband apologizes she looks down, feeling "ashamed of what she had let slip," and is soon "silent in his arms, as though already distant" (125). Sarah's timely death occurs in the following chapter, soon after her momentary transgression of the norms which govern female humility.

In contrast, Sonya Plopler and Bassieh Knopp have distinctive voices throughout the novel and continually announce their personal desires. Their direct manners and forthrightness, however, offend the other characters. Moreover, the narrative's endorsement of this distaste becomes evident in the comic moments which often are achieved at the expense of Sonya Plopler's penchant for gossip and Bassieh Knopp's tendency toward self-aggrandizement.

Despite her irritation with her mother-in-law, Ruth admires the marriage of Sarah and Abraham, the success of which depends on the rigid adherence to culturally sanctioned roles and their attendant codes of behaviour. Ruth aspires to a similar shared intimacy between herself and Isaac. Although she does not envision herself as fragile, she fantasizes that Isaac may one day treat her "as though she were made of glass" (134). This reverie conforms to the values of orthodox Judaism upheld by Abraham. As long as Ruth cleaves to this fantasy she does not provoke her father-in-law. When she takes the initiative required to support herself and her family after Isaac's death, however, she challenges Abraham's ideal of the dependent female.

Ruth's cataclysmic argument with Abraham is spurred by her decision to act, a move toward economic independence which is the catalyst for the murder of Laiah. Like Sarah, whose lifelong suffering is the aftermath of the irrational killing of her sons during a pogrom in Russia, Ruth bears the burden of another's crime. She continually fights "the impulse to blame herself" (310) for Abraham's murder of Laiah and is plagued by the fear that she has misunderstood her father-in-law.

Powerless whether or not they embrace the subordinate position which Judaism traditionally assigns to women, the novel's female characters bear a weight of suffering.

Although Laiah shares in the suffering of Sarah and Ruth, her pain is heightened for she is denied the respect they receive as wives and mothers. Further, as a prostitute she is ostracized by the same women who otherwise would offer her community. Laiah therefore is marginalized by her marital status, by her childlessness, and by her livelihood. But marginalization proves insufficient punishment for Laiah's offences. Her deliberate challenging of Judaism, which deems it highly inappropriate for a woman to behave as temptress, cannot succeed within the world of *The Sacrifice*. As Nancy K. Miller states, "in so much women's fiction a world outside love proves to be out of the world altogether" (45). As a result, Laiah endures material and emotional hardship: economic insecurity, failed relationships, the denial of love and friendship, loneliness, verbal and sexual provocation, and barrenness. Her desire to give and receive love is repeatedly and sadly misinterpreted by a community which does not condone the expression of female desire, sexual or otherwise.

UNLIKE THE CHARACTERS OF THE NOVEL, the narrative periodically shows sympathy for Laiah: "Life had not dealt squarely with her. . . . Nothing had ever gone right for her from the very start" (192). More often, however, the narrative mirrors Abraham's dominant attitude toward Laiah and treats her with irony and disdain. Laiah is presented primarily as a hypocritical woman who yearns for acceptance by the same society whose patriarchal constraints she publicly defies with her displays of vanity, sensuality, and worldly knowledge.

The slaying of Laiah is an attempt to silence a woman who protests against the narrowness of her life as a Jewish woman and who seeks through self-expression and personal freedom to undermine Judaic convention. Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains:

Death comes for a female character when she has a jumbled, distorted, inappropriate relation to the "social script" or plot designed to contain her legally, economically, and sexually. Death is the result when energies of selfhood, often represented by sexuality, at once their most enticing and most damaging expression, are expended outside the "couvert" of marriage or valid romance: through adultery . . . , loss of virginity or even suspected "impurity" . . . , or generalized female passion . . . (15)

Laiah, who is described ironically as a "devil" (33), is guilty of all the above, adultery, impurity, and passion. Moreover, her sexual desire is couched in incestuous language: Abraham is confused by the "childish petulance in Laiah's voice" (302) when she asks "'Little father' . . . 'will you be good to me?'" (300-01).

Unlike the lesser transgressions of Sarah and Ruth, those of Laiah are sexual in nature and therefore are punishable. As DuPlessis affirms, "Death in general is a more than economic arrangement, for the punishment of one desire is the end of all" (16). In a scene that recalls Abraham's profane slaughter of a cow when he was apprenticed to a corrupt butcher, Laiah is attributed bovine features and is ceremoniously butchered: "under her eyelids her eyebulbs were large and fine. Her forehead wrinkled and was somehow sad, like that of some time-forgotten creatures than had crept out to seek the sun" (303). Unlike his biblical namesake who is prevented from sacrificing Isaac, the fictional Abraham carries out the murder of Laiah.

Within this tradition-bound society the norms of patriarchy will not be flouted without repercussions and Laiah is killed for her indiscretion, a shocking articulation of the misogyny which is embedded in the narrative. Nonetheless, in its denial of reconciliation and reparation to its female characters, privileges which the novel finally accords its male characters, *The Sacrifice* proclaims itself a patriarchal text.

In *Crackpot* the fate of the female subject is radically revised. While *The Sacrifice* draws to a close with Laiah's corpse and its flow of "warm blood" (304), *Crackpot* begins and concludes with large, accommodating, sensual Hoda. In Wiseman's second novel, a female-centred work written in the comic mode, the nurturing matriarch has displaced the overseer, judge, and patriarch of *The Sacrifice* and the narrative is aligned with the female rather than the male subject.

Crackpot prefers Hoda's physical amplex and earthy appetite to Abraham's noble stature and his disavowal of pleasure. Hoda challenges her assigned passive role. Demanding to be seen and heard, she rejects the silence of Sarah in favour of garrulity and, unlike Ruth who toils respectably for years, Hoda achieves an economic success which exceeds her initial expectations. Moreover, unlike Laiah, Hoda publicly embraces her work. She is not alienated or punished or murdered for her choice of profession; rather she is rewarded with love and marriage. In fact, *Crackpot* is a novel of celebration, a record of the singular triumph of a Jewish prostitute.¹ Eighteen years earlier Laiah had been denied a similar success. By 1974, however, a different vision and a revised understanding of women's position within Judaism are articulated in *Crackpot* which, partly through mood and characterization, subverts orthodox tradition.

Whereas the first pages of *The Sacrifice* construct the male as the dominant subject and prevailing consciousness of the novel, *Crackpot* opens with an engaging description of Rahel and Hoda, her overfed daughter. The work immediately affirms the secondary position of its male characters in relation to their female counterparts and the dominance of the female voice. *Crackpot* redraws the family matrix to consist of a husband who is a passive idealist, a wife who is a wage-earner, and a child who is a self-willed individual. While Abraham remains the noble patriarch throughout the tragic turn of events in *The Sacrifice*, Danile never enjoys

the position of a man who either is revered by the Jewish community or respected as the head of a household.

Because of his blindness Danile is marginalized by his own people and is largely ineffectual as both husband and father. In fact, Danile's position within the community and his family is superseded by Rahel who, despite her own infirmity, supports her family by cleaning the homes of Jewish families and by Hoda who assumes responsibility for her father following Rahel's death, whose perspective dominates the work, and with whom the narrative is compassionately aligned. The sympathetic portrayal of Hoda contrasts sharply with the previously ironic treatment of Laiah. By the second paragraph of the novel, when the young Hoda rumbles "Maa-a-a-a-ah" in "a surprisingly chesty contralto" (7), she has laid claim to the text. The prostitute as enticer of *The Sacrifice* is recast in *Crackpot* as the prostitute-cum-earth mother who displaces the male in an affirming tale of "condoms," "prurience," and "incestry" (300).

Unlike *The Sacrifice*, where the narrative's irony connotes disdain and several characters express their disapproval of Laiah's sexuality, *Crackpot* conveys admiration for Hoda through comic irony. Hoda is respected for her behaviour which challenges Judaism's ethos of female submissiveness, the same behaviour for which Laiah is vilified in *The Sacrifice*. At the Public Health Office, for example, where she is tested for venereal disease and all but proclaims herself a prostitute to the others seated in the waiting room, Hoda forfeits neither the narrative's nor the reader's approbation. Rather, she is described as having

developed, over the years, a kind of sophistication, a public attitude, a way of out-facing whoever faced her. Deliberately, she would introduce the question, "What do you do for a living?" so that she could work round to telling them, in her turn, still sloshing her [urine] specimen innocently, "Me? Oh, I make ends meet . . ." (210)

In contrast to Laiah, whose several attempts to achieve self-sufficiency are thwarted, Hoda appears throughout *Crackpot* as she is described above, resourceful, independent, and heroic. The shift from tragedy in *The Sacrifice* to comedy in *Crackpot*,² which signals the move from solemnity to celebration and from a critical to a sympathetic narrative, indicates support for Hoda's challenging of normative behaviour for women and allows for her personal triumph at the close of the novel.

THE MARKED SIMILARITIES between Hoda and Laiah are their prostitution and the marginalized status attributed to them by others. The characterization of Hoda differs from that of Laiah, however, in significant ways. Rather than suffer for her choice of profession, Hoda flourishes in spite of it. She successfully supports herself and her father by her meagre income. Hoda enjoys

long-lasting relationships with friends and family members and strives to sustain difficult associations with her Uncle Nate, for example. Unlike Laiah, whose family history is undisclosed, Hoda is the cherished daughter of devoted parents and she nurtures her elderly father. Hoda shares the companionship of her colleague, Seraphina, without the jealousy and competition that exists between Laiah and Jenny. Moreover, Hoda serves both the therapeutic and sexual needs of her customers, many of whom regard her as their friend.

Hoda refuses to be excluded and participates as a secular member of the Jewish community, as well as a citizen of the large urban centre in which she lives. Although she often feels alone and disconnected, hers is not a predominantly lonely life as is Laiah's. In contrast to Laiah, Hoda responds to verbal or sexual provocation with characteristic humour, a limited means of self-protection adopted by Jews throughout history. Solemn reactions are reserved for those situations which warrant them, such as Hoda's first incestuous encounter with her son David. Moreover, unlike Laiah, Hoda bears a child who is both the cause of tremendous anguish and the vehicle for her personal reconciliation which concludes the novel.

In fact, it is primarily the act of childbirth which distinguishes Hoda from Laiah. Judaism views the birth of a son as a privilege and the birth of a male child confers high status on a woman. Although she is denied that status by virtue of her occupation and her circumstances as an unwed mother, Hoda reclaims her son through incest.

In *The Sacrifice* the incestuous desire of Laiah for Abraham is implicit. In *Crackpot*, however, the act of incest is central and is both subversive and subverted by the novel. In a parodic³ inversion of mother-son incest, *Crackpot* turns the tale of Jocasta and Oedipus on its head. Instead of engendering tragedy and alienation as it does in the Theban drama, the incestuous relationship between Hoda and David facilitates the novel's comic resolution. As Linda Hutcheon explains, "Parody today is endowed with the power to renew. It need not do so, but it can. . . . What has traditionally been called parody privileges the normative impulse, but today's art abounds as well in examples of parody's power to revitalize" (115).

In another parody of the biblical story of Lot, Abraham's nephew who remains unaware of his incestuous encounters with his daughters, Hoda assumes the unlikely position of maternal authority by displacing the father and by choosing to accept rather than reject her son. Here, incest is neither an unacknowledged act, as in the case of Jocasta and Oedipus, nor a means of begetting male heirs, as in the case of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38).

Instead, incest becomes an act of compassion as Hoda selflessly enters a relationship with David who, like Oedipus and Lot, remains oblivious to the true nature of the sexual union in which he participates. Although Hoda suffers with the knowledge that she is David's mother, the decision to succumb to his request for sexual relations is prompted by maternal concern and she is careful not to abuse

her position of power. Moreover, through their incestuous connection Hoda and David are united spiritually.

The use of incest as a means of achieving reconciliation subverts the general understanding of the act as one in which the father is the perpetrator of a sexual crime and the daughter is the violated innocent. The reversal of roles in *Crackpot* does not have devastating results, as incest usually does either in fiction or in reality. Instead, both female and male subjects mature as a result of their intimacy and move on to more gratifying experiences.

The engagement of Hoda and Lazar, with which the novel concludes, is characteristic of the affirming nature of comedy. In contrast to Laiah, who is silenced for her deviant behaviour, Hoda is rewarded with marriage through which she finally is reinscribed into Judaism. As she relinquishes her profession and assumes the role "of a good wife" (298) she secures a place within her religion and her community. While marriage to Lazar and potential childbirth may suggest the objectification of Hoda through a loss of individuality and independence, an ending "in which the gain is both financial and romantic success in the 'heterosexual contract'" (DuPlessis 4), her reinscription into Judaism must be seen as a celebration of renewed opportunity, a revision of the unsatisfactory alternatives available to women in *The Sacrifice*.

Hoda is neither silenced nor destined to the solitary life of an aging prostitute; rather she is allowed personal fulfillment, a subversive achievement for women, to say nothing of whores within Judaism. In her discovery that "she really liked love, now that she had found out exactly where it lived and how it worked. Love lived where it couldn't help itself, had to say yes, couldn't resist and had to give in, couldn't think, couldn't hide, couldn't pretend . . ." (108), Hoda triumphs where Laiah is punished.

The Sacrifice and *Crackpot* construct a female subject as prostitute in order to free her from the limitations imposed on all women, married or single. While *The Sacrifice* does not embrace the prostitute, who already exists on the margins of society, and castigates her for desiring freedom, *Crackpot* celebrates her life and rewards her with integration. Whereas Laiah weakens over time, Hoda literally and figuratively proves larger than the constraints of the patriarchy. *Crackpot's* revisionist reading of the earlier novel is an atonement for the unholy, parodic "sacrifice" of Laiah and an attempt to locate a place for women within Judaism and fiction which will foster their independence and accommodate rather than repress their individuality.

NOTES

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¹ The figure of the Jewish prostitute is rare enough in Canadian literature. A third example occurs in Miriam Waddington's poem "The Bond," where the speaker

identifies herself with a "Whore, Jewess" who is "twice outcast." *Green World*. *New Writers* 3 (Montreal: First Statement, 1945) n. pag.

- ² Although the critical reevaluation of genre from a feminist perspective is relevant to my argument, I have refrained from a generic examination of Wiseman's novels since that is not the focus of this paper.
- ³ My use of "parody" conforms to Linda Hutcheon's definition of the term as "imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways. Ironic versions of 'transcontextualization' and inversion are its major formal operatives, and the range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage." *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985) 37.

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SIGN

J. Michael Yates

Something wishes just to be what it is.
 One comes to regard time as nonexistent hazily.
 You have something to fall back on.
 You do that: Fall back.
 One year was like every other.
 Eventually everything would happen.
 Nothing can be just what it is.