

## INTERPRETATION OF JEWISH TRADITION IN CYNTHIA OZICK'S NOVEL LEVITATION

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Levitation representing an assumption that “converted Jewish women must submit to patriarchy both in their behavior as wives and in their conversion to Judaism” (L 23). The present study deals with Jewish tradition and the era of Jewish American feminist writer Cynthia Ozick, she has interpreted her own culture in her novel *Levitation*. Being a Jew how Cynthia Ozick was taunted in her career. She portrayed Lucy a Jewish woman and how she suffered for being a Jew it's nicely depicted in her novel *Levitation*. It shows with the magic of Ozick's narrative technique and examines her writing skills.

Judaism is a set of beliefs and practices in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), as later further explored and explained in the Talmud and other texts. Orthodox Jewish law imposes an inferior status upon women outside the home. In the home, according to Jewish law, women have authority over all aspects of children's upbringing and education, and at the same time, “from its very beginning, Judaism has been outspokenly patriarchal” (Trepp 268). Jewish law expects women, regardless of their intellectual achievements or contributions, to submit to their marital obligations.

In orthodox Judaism, “if any man teaches his daughter Torah it is as though he taught her lechery” (Swilder 93)., and therefore, women are not “intellectuals, because only what the men do and learn will change the status of the family as a whole” (Schneider 150). This conception that women are incapable of literature and intellectual endeavors with the orthodox exclusion of women from the rabbinate. Orthodox Judaism does not approve of women seeking or obtaining any other positions of authority.

Ozick's Jewish ness is the predominant theme in all her novels and stories. Ozick uses the Yiddish language because she wants the reader to learn the Jewish language and that is the main purpose of her writings. Cynthia Ozick is a brilliant writer. Her writing sparkles, glows, resonate. She has a marvelous command of

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the language, and she does wondrous things with it. Ozick's writing is also profound. She ponders over the larger questions especially about the nature, purpose, and possibility of art, as well as questions of morality and without alienating the reader. Her Jewish background also marks much of her writing. Ozick writing is provincial, which can be problematic for those not from the same provinces. The religious focus is also not to everyone's taste, but Ozick's arguments and expression are thoughtful and refined and generally fascinating to follow, regardless of the subject.

She is knowledgeable about a wide variety of subjects and especially about literature and her novels are a pleasure to be read for her style and technique. Cynthia Ozick is an excellent story teller and novelist. She is a writer innately drawn to paradox and to the moral questions inherent in the relationships between richness and poverty, mind and body, history and imagination. She also deals repeatedly with the dynamic not just between Jew and Diaspora but between being a writer and being a Jew.

In *Levitation*, Ozick embedded the Jewish tradition which was the major theme in the novel. She presents her pains and feelings which she has experienced in her childhood days. Because of being Jewish, she is taunted by the school teachers. Her frustrations could carry on throughout her life. She wants to confirm that the readers do not have a bad opinion about tradition. They have to get rid of the assumptions about Jewish women.

Ozick's own experience as a writer reflects her early submissiveness to Jewish legal expectations of women. Cynthia Ozick is the Jewish American women writer who has affinity for the classical view of life, during her formative years, and who has written extensively about the gentile mainstream of culture; Hebrew, Hellenic and Christian have furnished the major materials and obsessions of her artistic career, which now features in a novel and in three books of short stories. A new novel in a collection of essay which follows the usual pattern of that of James Joyce, Hemingway, and Hawthorne. Cynthia Ozick was born in New York city on April 17, 1928, the second child of William and Celia Ozick. From 1933 to 1941, she attended Public school in Bronx, New York. Her parents owned a drugstore, and Ozick helped the family business by delivering prescriptions when she was a child. In grade school, she was taunted for being a Jew. For example, she was shamed for not singing Christmas carols and called anti-Semitic names. However, during her childhood her commitment to becoming a writer was inspired partially because her uncle, Abraham Regelson, was a Hebrew poet; a role she envisioned for herself. Cynthia Ozick belongs to the twentieth century group of American Jewish writer.

In Ozick's novels orthodox Jewish law requires segregations of men and women in study and synagogue attendance. The orthodox Jewish faith forbids mixed

marriages, since marriage is an "agreement between Jewish men, Jewish women, and God, so it is thought that the contract cannot possibly make sense if one partner isn't Jewish (Schnieder321). In a novel "Levitation" Lucy and Jimmy Feingold is a mixed marriage in representing an assumption that "converted Jewish women must submit to patriarchy both in their behavior as wives and in their conversation to Judaism" (L 23). Along with orthodox Judaism's rejection of interfaith marriages, the orthodox considered homosexuality was wrong since every "sex must in principle be capable of leading to a strengthening of the land through the increase of its inhabitants. It must be the kind that produces children" (Trepp265). Basil Herring asserts that the orthodox consider homosexuality as an understanding of the "family institution that is the basis of society as we have come to know it (176). Orthodox law also considers transvestism as an affront against god. According to Leo Trepp, "the characteristics of men and women may never be blurred, even so in dress [...] a woman must not put on man's apparel, nor shall a man wear women's clothing for whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord your God" (266). If a family discovers that their child or sibling is gay or a transvestite, orthodox Jews expect the family to disown the individuals.

The reason orthodox Judaism considers homosexuality and transvestism to be wrong may originate in the orthodox Jewish definition of masculinity. According to Trepp, the commemoration of a Jewish boy's path to manhood begins after he is circumcised (241). The circumcision establishes a covenant with God which the boy fosters with a bar mitzvah and which he completes by having a son of his own and ensuring that the son undergoes the same milestones. In *Levitation* we find, Jimmy has had this ceremony for his son. It denotes his passion for custom. The bar mitzvah ceremony consists of a thirteen-year old young man's recitation of a segment of Torah scroll along with reading of a prophetic portion of the Torah (Trepp 242). After he completes the readings the young man is responsible for his own actions and must perform mitzvah, or religious obligations. Since the youngster must execute adult responsibilities, orthodox Jews view the bar mitzvah as a symbolic acknowledgement that the boy has become a man. For the boy's father, the bar mitzvah marks the conclusions of his parental obligations. If men are gay or transvestites, orthodox Jew fear that they will fail to produce covenanted children.

Cynthia Ozick's representation of women as writers and Jews in relation to orthodox law reveals that orthodox Jewish law treats women as intellectually and socially inferior to men. In *Levitation* she discusses about how Jewish woman is subjected by the male society. Because she is a Jewish woman, she is restricted by the orthodox Jewish law. But the heroine Lucy Feingold breaks her Jewish tradition and proved her talent, showing the world that she is equally good intellectually and socially. Her blindness to orthodox Jewish law is driven away by her desires.

Cynthia Ozick's "Levitation" satirically examines how Orthodox Judaism inhibits female success. Lucy Feingold believes that, as a female writer and Jewish convert, she could never receive the same respect from critics as her husband. Cynthia Ozick has experienced the misogyny and Jewish tradition which probably affected the personal and the logical separation between Lucy and Jimmy Feingold in *Levitation*. The Jewish writing Community generally did not take women's writing very seriously so when Ozick wrote *Levitation* critics expected women writers to conform to male written fiction patterns in order to gain acceptance. Lucy's experiences as a Jewish writer are similar to Ozick's experience of misogyny. Lucy is a catholic who converted to Judaism in order to marry Jimmy. Ozick's reception depended on her gender. Lucy's marriage to Jimmy depends on her conversion to Judaism. Because Lucy refuses to write in a prescribed style, her conversion mirrors Ozick's writing. The separation of Lucy and Jimmy at the party, and Lucy's purported inferiority that she experiences in her marriage because of orthodox Jewish law, represent Cynthia Ozick's real life effort to overcome stereotypical assumptions about the woman's place in Jewish America.

Analyzing Jewish gender laws in conjunction with Ozick's characterization of Lucy confirms that Lucy's gender is a catalyst for her separation from the male Jews. By concentrating on Lucy's domestic responsibilities to entertain guests, take care of children, and cook rather than focusing on her vocation as a writer, Ozick presents Lucy as a proper Jewish woman whose career is secondary to family. The narrator introduces Lucy as Jimmy's wife, yet, despite the fact that she is the protagonist of the story. This introduction defines her more as his spouse than as his intellectual equal. "Jimmy wrote about Jews, but Lucy's only published work about domestic life".(L 4).

Ozick's description of Lucy's writing in relation to her role as Jimmy's wife conforms to the traditional status of women in orthodox Jewish law. Lucy does not follow the responsibility at her party and she neglects the orthodox Jewish laws. It expresses Ozick's belief that women should not rely on men for support. Lucy's duties as a hostess confine her to the outskirts of the party since the only serves food and clean up after the guests, rather than participants in their conversations. Lucy's eyes "swam by blank eyed" (L10). While she served a platter of cheese during the beginning of the party. Her figurative segregation from the guest in each of the three rooms where the party takes place arises out of her responsibility as a Jewish wife. According to Leonard Swidler, "Jewish women were not only to be seen as little as possible, they were also to be heard and spoken to as possible" (123).

Jewish wives are not converse with the guests, but to ensure that they have enough food and their home should be kept clean. During the party, Lucy speaks only to Feingold until the concluding paragraph, when Jimmy grabs her arm, and declares that the party is a "waste no one's here" (L 52). He focuses his concerns

on the absence of his preferred, elite guests rather than on Lucy's alienation. Jewish law also strongly portray you shall not spread any grains while you are eating the food, you shall keep the place very clean.

Lucy submits to the orthodox law that women should remain unseen. Thus, Lucy initially submits to the orthodox perception of a quiet house wife. Ozick estranges Lucy from the party to establish contempt for the orthodox Jewish law that women should remain silent when among Jewish men. She is fed up of cleaning the house. Lucy loses her patience which is revealed in the act of stuffing a piece of cake in her husband's mouth. She leaves as the rebellion is not only against her husband's personality and their marriage, but also against her role as a Jewish wife.

Therefore "Levitation" Ozick embedded the Jewish tradition which was the major theme in the novel. She presents her pain and feelings when she has experienced in her childhood days. Because of being Jewish, she is taunted by the school teachers. Her frustrations could carry on throughout her life. She wants to come out of this sad happening so that she has written this novel. She wants to confirm that the readers do not have a bad opinion about tradition. They have to get rid of the assumptions about Jewish women.

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