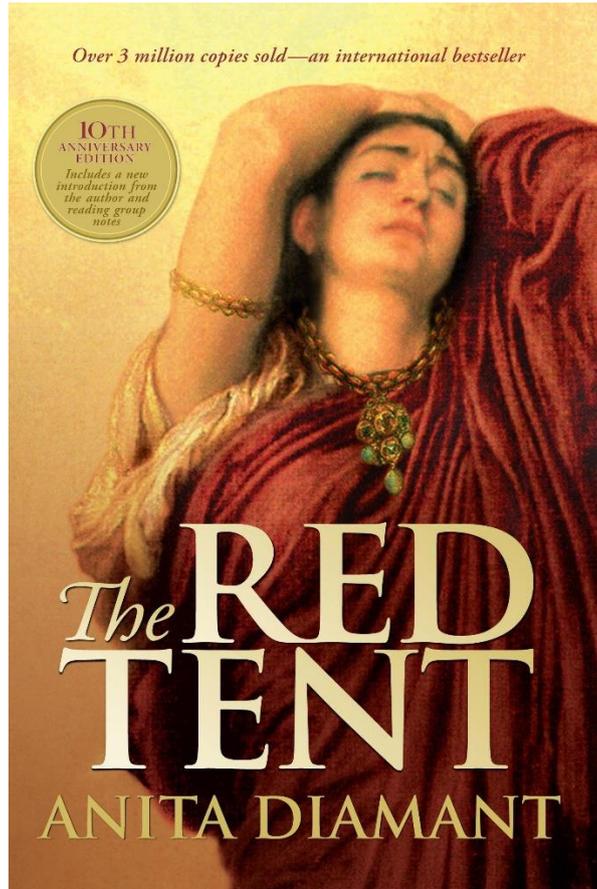


## Gyno-topias of Power in Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*

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### The Body

The swerve in feminist discourse had taken place when Helene Cixous affirmed that the body could be construed through writing. If 'writing' and 'the body' are considered as the imaginary and the real space respectively, then in "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous bridges them; yet in praxis, it was undiscovered. Though 'Women and Literature' has been fairly explored and contended, since *A Room of One's Own*, the identity of the female writer remained a silhouette, far removed from the substance- the body. This lack of a 'totalizing representation' disturbed Patricia Stubbs and Elaine Showalter who sought feminist writers "to give a 'truthful picture of a woman', a picture that would include equal emphasis on the private and the public" (Moi 7). By reclaiming the body through writing, a political space is created for subversion, thereby helping women to emerge from the cages of ghost living.

### Complex Space

The body, however, is a complex space. Setha M. Low in her “Embodied Space(s): Anthropological Theories of Body, Space and Culture” corroborates the idea of Bryan Turner and states that human beings “have bodies” and “are bodies”. She discusses how the human body has got an intrinsic social and cultural character whereby the body, mind and emotions are simultaneously trained so that the social status and class position become embodied in everyday life. (Low 12). This shows that the body cannot be considered as a single entity instead it is inevitably linked to external facets. This will also convert the body into an objective and a subjective space where every space is determined and distinguished by/through power.

The manifestation of power through the reflection of the self/body in writing may seem utopian<sup>1</sup> (slipping into the confines of the imaginary; beyond the real, if not surreal). By calling such feminist writing as utopian will negate the already existent powerful feminist writing that reveal the self through writing. In that sense, the signified ‘self’ in feminist writing could be considered as heterotopian; a place that is segregated from the main place but palpably identifiable through its dynamics of power.

### **Heterotopia**

The term ‘heterotopia’ had been introduced by Foucault in “Of Other Space: Utopias and Heterotopias” where he describes the same as:

...[existing] probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places- places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society- which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (3)

### ***The Red Tent***

On looking at the novel, *The Red Tent*, at prima facie, is a reworking of a particular episode in the Old Testament of the Bible/ The Torah namely the violation of Dinah; its objective being to redeem the autonomy of the female space. By turning the text into a political statement, Anita Diamant is also challenging the impeccable righteousness of the men in contrast to the treachery and vice of the women depicted in the scripture. ‘The Rape of Dinah’ as the Old Testament records, is an episode where Dinah (the daughter of Jacob and Leah) is ravished by Shechem, son of Hamor, who is the Chief, but is later asked in marriage with a handsome bride price. In return, the sons of Jacob demand the circumcision of all the men of Hamor’s region, including the chief and the son. After the act is done, Simeon and Levi barge into Hamor’s land and slaughter all the men. Though Jacob is disturbed that the surrounding tribes would attack them, Simeon and Levi reassure him saying “We cannot let our sister be treated like a common whore.” (Gen 34.31). Nothing is mentioned of Dinah after the incident and Dinah is forgotten or rather removed from the subsequent narration.



Anita Diamant

Courtesy: <http://anitadiamant.com/>

### **Anita Diamant**

Anita Diamant rescues Dinah from oblivion by granting her a past, present and future through her fictive narration in *The Red Tent*. In doing so, the defendant is also allowed to speak in order to give the readers a variant, a possibility, a ‘truth’. However, in close inspection, it is seen that, the novel does not distort the fundamental mores of the period. Diamant retains Jacob as the patriarchal head who succeeds Laban through hard work and persistence. In this sense, Jacob controls the main space of the novel while the women who are associated with him namely Leah, Rachael, Bilhah, Zilpah and Dinah are pushed to the periphery. Nevertheless, they are major contributors to the prosperity of Jacob. This transforms the women into the ‘other space’ which is simultaneously connected and distanced from the main space thereby transforming them into a heterotopia. Correspondingly, there are other qualities that the women manifest that correlate with the six principles that Foucault elucidates in “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”. In order to study the women depicted in the novel as a heterotopia, it is necessary to inspect their subversive qualities and the counter spaces that they create through these qualities.

### **Women Who Occupy a Central Position in The Plot**

The major women who occupy a central position in the plot of the novel are Leah, Rachael, Zilpah, Bilhah and Dinah. Besides their subservience that is perceptible, these women have carved a ‘self’ that is independent of their relationship to men, which in turn correlates to the principles of Foucault. In the novel, the red tent (which could be seen as a crisis heterotopia, as discussed by Foucault) is only considered as a structure of privacy. Within the red tent, the women honour their bodies for cleansing the last month’s death, “preparing the body to retrieve the new month’s life... for repose and restoration, for the knowledge that life comes from between the legs, and that life costs blood” (*The Red Tent* 188). Within this space, the women see themselves as the spring of life. It is not the space that is segregated instead it is their bodies that is segregated from the main space during the period of menstruation. Therefore, the body itself could be considered as the crisis heterotopia.

Within the red tent, the women gather to menstruate and deliver and become ‘whole’ beings, each with a quality that is distinctive of the other. The first woman who is introduced by Dinah in the novel is her mother Leah, the daughter of Laban and Adah. The authority of Leah is seen when she is visibly displeased with Rachael for having a flirtatious conversation with Jacob at the couple’s first encounter at the well. This establishes Leah as a woman who prefers to be sought after more than the other women in the tent. Leah is also conscious of her bodily needs. She syncs her identity with that of the function of the womb which is evident when she revels in Zilpah’s prophecy that Leah would have eight healthy children. The awareness of her bodily need to bear fruit trails her constantly that she becomes mindful of Jacob’s worth to father her children. She is also perceptive enough to understand that she can have a soft control over Jacob if she shows that she can manage the activities of the tent as well as if she bears him sons.

### **Leah**

Nonetheless, Leah is not engrossed in servitude. She tends to her body at the right time when it becomes weak by taking fennel seeds to prevent conception and abandons them when she feels she is ready to reproduce. This shows that, for Leah, motherhood is not an obligation, on the other hand, a willing choice that she makes to fulfill her desires. Leah, thus sees her body not as a public place but rather as a heterotopian space where, “either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications.” (Foucault 7)

### **Rachael**

In the case of Rachael, she also has a unique reverence for the body which, despite being unable (for a long period) to utilize for procreation, she uses its course to help other women experience fulfillment. “Rachael’s presence was powerful as the moon, and just as beautiful. Nobody could deny her beauty” (*The Red Tent* 9). Though she is capable of stimulating Jacob far greater than Leah, she is unable to bear a child for a long time. The desire to experience the miracles of the body, magnified after seeing the consecutive births of Leah, torments her that she goes to Inna, the midwife, to learn the secrets of the body.

From Inna, Rachael understands the design of the female-self, the sanctity of the monthly birth and death within the body and the phenomenon of creation. She becomes Inna’s apprentice and devotes herself to the knowledge of procreation. Her knowledge is not only linked to the birthing process of women, rather she explores herbalism too. She also teaches the value of these herbs to the women of her tent along with the various stories that she learnt during her travel. Gradually, “Rachael became their link to the larger world” (*The Red Tent* 57). Rachael sees the body as a chronicler of time since it holds creation and destruction within itself along with the past and the future. While speaking of heterotopias, Foucault also discusses how these counter places are often linked to slices in time. Rachael shows how the female body can also be considered as a heterotopian space that embodies the qualities of the past generation and contain the seed of the future generation.

### **Spirituality Plays a Crucial Role**

While inspecting the other characters of the novel, it is seen that spirituality also plays a very important role in how some women perceive their bodies. “From the age of her first blood, Zilpah thought of herself as a kind of priestess, the keeper of the mysteries of the red tent, the daughter of Asherah the sister-Siduri who counsels women” (*The Red Tent* 15). As

far as Zilpah was concerned, women had no use of men except to impregnate women and to carry heavy loads. Zilpah embraced the nurturing, preservative and protective quality of the female body associated with spirituality and not the demanding and condemning aspect of it.

Every thought of Zilpah displays that she fuses the material and the spiritual. She dreams of Dinah when she is in Leah's womb: "...she saw me weeping a river of blood that gave rise to flat monsters that opened mouths filled with rows of sharp teeth... You walked their backs and tamed their ugliness and disappeared into the sun" (*The Red Tent* 80). The "monster", "the river of blood" and "the sun" indicates that Zilpah combines the real and the ethereal world within her mind/body. Although mutually exclusive, Zilpah treats her body as a spiritual as well as a material entity. Thus, Zilpah is "justapoxing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 6). Therefore, Zilpah's perception of the body is also that of a heterotopia.

A magnified version of Zilpah's spirituality is seen in Rebecca who is considered as the Oracle of Mamre. She celebrates the nurturing aspect of her spiritual body, yet she also creates a cold and powerful expanse around her that makes the pilgrims bow down in fear and submission. Her behavior, although disapproved by Dinah, helps in celebrating the 'spiritual woman'. Rebecca's assertion of her inner spiritual self is also indicative of her need to revert the discrimination that women face in terms of their spiritual superiority. According to Tumanov, Diamant consciously turns the tables to female spirituality to show how the androcentric narration of the life of Jacob inadvertently converts the female deities into pagan gods. Therefore, this justifies Rebecca's anger when she realizes that Tabea's mother had not initiated the young girl into the ways of a woman after she sheds her first blood. Rebecca's motive becomes explicit when Leah explains to Dinah, "She was defending the ways of our mothers and their mothers, and the great mother, who goes by many names, but who is in danger of being forgotten." (*The Red Tent* 186)

### **Bilhah's Femininity**

Among the four sisters, Bilhah's femininity is extenuated to a great proportion. Dinah remembers Bilhah as a woman who listened and saw clearly. Bilhah is receptive enough to understand the minuscule changes in the environment. Most often, her detection relates to the internal rather than the external changes of the body. Even when Bilhah goes into Jacob's tent, she is only conscious of the reactions of her own body. "...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 hoped for" (*The Red Tent* 63). The serenity that engulfs Bilhah is characteristic of the impenetrability of her body. She is simultaneously distant yet powerful through her senses and she moulds her body to recognize every other space that is connected to her. Thus, Bilhah has a "function in relation to all the space that remains" (Foucault 8).

### **Attentive to Principles of Their Bodies**

Leah, Rachael, Bilhah and Zilpah's attentiveness to the principles of their body is infused in their daughter Dinah in whom they ease their burdens. However, Dinah's evolution and recognition of her body principle does not happen impetuously. It is interesting to note that the novel follows a deliberate trajectory in the mental and physical space. Just as how the women travel from Haran to Canaan through Edom, Succoth and Mamre (Egypt, in the case of Dinah) and undergo a physical alteration, they also experience a shift in their conception of womanhood. This gradual course is also seen in Dinah who matures intuitively.

As a young girl, in the first section of the novel, Dinah is fervent to ameliorate her position in the tent which is seen when she does not surrender to her mother's reprimands. She tries to excel at the loom and even takes pride in being in-charge of the chores when her mothers are menstruating. Soon after understanding that her father has a control over her mothers, she shifts her focus to self-exploration. It is commendable that even before attaining her puberty, Dinah becomes accustomed to the ways of men and women and learns to look beyond the rudimentary customs. Dinah is never deluded regarding her individuality. As she grows, she is also able to see through her mothers' imperfections. Thus Dinah sets a very contemplative and pragmatic image in the first phase of her life.

In the second phase, Dinah shows a similar attentiveness when she meets Shalem for the first time. She understands that she is experiencing an emotion that had been discussed extensively by her mother-aunties within the quiet intimate corners of the red tent. Even during the nights spent with Shalem, Dinah is assertive of her needs and claims. "You know, my lord, that women only submit to the caresses of their husbands-they do not enjoy the rough use of their bodies" (*The Red Tent* 239). It is highly unlikely that Leah or the "lovely" Rachael would have 'demanded' tenderness from Jacob.

When Shalem is murdered by her brothers Simeon and Levi, Dinah does not tarry to curse her father; the patriarchal head whom even the headstrong Leah would have dared to question. "Jacob shall never know peace again. He will lose what he treasures and repudiate those he should embrace. He will never again find rest, and his prayers will not find the favor of his father's god" (*The Red Tent* 245-246). Dinah immediately detaches all her relationship with her family including her mothers, who surprisingly did not utter a word in favour of their cherished daughter.

## Dinah

However, Dinah is unable to exercise her free will after reaching Egypt primarily because she has taken up a new role of motherhood that she was unprepared for. Nevertheless, she tries to imbibe the experience of being a mother. Gradually, Dinah learns to embrace motherhood, often recalling the love and the care her own mothers had given her when she was a child. But, this experience is short lived for Dinah as she is forced to forego her son, Re-mose and become detached to him. As Re-mose grows, Dinah becomes accustomed to the distancing that her son forms towards her. After the death of Re-nefer, Dinah undergoes a resurrection within herself as she breaks free from her accountability to Re-nefer and her duty towards her son.

Dinah's cyclical return happens through the restoration of her female dominion. She reinstates her passion in midwifery and help Meryt to deliver babies in Egypt. Later, when she meets Benia, she is completely prepared to take up a new life with another man. At the end of the novel, it is established that her body as a heterotopia "function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopias can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another" (Foucault 5).

There are also other women in the novel like Adah, Ruti, Tabea, Werenro, Esau's wives and Meryt's kin who have in some way explored their counter sites but whose stories

have not been sufficiently elaborated in the novel to gain a better understanding of their perception. Nevertheless, all the female characters in Diamant's design show why it is necessary to keep the memories alive so that women learn to get acquainted to their subversive spaces and instill them in their daughters.

### **Excavating the Female Subject from the Past**

By excavating the female subject from the past, Anita Diamant is also offering a space for re-visioning the 'functions' of the female. By reducing the iconic figures of the Bible into ordinary human beings and by connecting to the world of the other characters in the Bible who were not brought to the forefront, Diamant is exposing the fallacy of hegemonic texts which have survived through interpretations and which have continued to dictate the position and function of the female subject. By questioning the cogency of the canon, Diamant is initiating a discourse where the sub-stream literature on/by women can contest.

The female characters of Anita Diamant's novels *The Red Tent* can thus be considered as heterotopias, however, concluding the study within the margins of the literary plane does not enhance the scope of extending the imaginary to the real. The understanding of the female-self as heterotopias in literature needs to expand into praxis. It is highly plausible that if the aforementioned understanding of the female-self as a heterotopia is maintained, then, the possibility of extending 'writing' to the 'body' can be achieved.

### **Conclusion**

However, this study has only attempted to consider the female characters of the novels as individual heterotopias and has not probed into the politics of female heterotopias /gyno-topias in collectivity. Nevertheless, from Anita Diamant's recognition of being a Jewish American woman in contestation with the receding religious past and the vanishing Jewish female literary voice departs an exclusive novel that combine and extend the real and imaginary, experience and memory, private and public, truth and interpretation, and also the self and the other. In doing so, the author is also creating a field through her novels where women of all times can become capable of giving alternate signification for the 'center' through counter spaces of the female heterotopian self.

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, in "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" states "Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but, in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. (1)

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