The Red Tent


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The Redemption of Dinah in Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent*

*The Red Tent,* Anita Diamant’s first work of fiction, reinterprets Genesis’ account of Dinah, Jacob’s only daughter. Dinah’s story is briefly recounted in Genesis, though her choice as a young woman to leave the territory of her tribe and “visit the women of the land” led to the massacre of the Hivvite’s of Shechem. Diamant admits that rewriting the entire history of a figure whose voice is mostly absent from the Torah required “imaginative wrestling” and cites the rabbinic tradition of Midrash as her guide. While she took many liberties in recreating the details of the women’s lives in Jacob’s tribe – namely Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah – Diamant’s interpretation that Dinah was not literally raped is shared by many contemporary biblical scholars.

According to Diamant, and to scholars such as Ita Sheres, the “disgrace” Dinah caused her family was not due to rape, but to her coupling with an uncircumcised man, an act that violated Abraham’s covenant with God. In her book, *Dinah’s Rebellion,* Sheres argues that the Deuteronical redactors of the Torah would have used Dinah’s story as an “ideological weapon” against “the Israelites of the First Commonwealth…who gave in to their evil impulses (with the help of women who led them astray).” Bolstered by this knowledge and the liberties of fiction, Diamant attempts to redeem Dinah’s story in *The Red Tent.* In doing so, she has also engages the mainstream readership’s desire to hear the “undertold” and misrepresented stories of biblical women and perhaps develop a new and discerning relationship with biblical storytelling.

However, because *The Red Tent* is so focused on the female perspective, one critic has called it “a touch too feminist and progressive for [its] time.” The Washington Post similarly criticized Diamant’s third work of fiction, *The Last Days of Dogtown,* saying that, like “The Red Tent,” the book was an “overlay of a modern sensibility on an imagined past.” In fact, critics of *The Red Tent* seem to fall into two categories: those who praise it for providing a radical feminist take on biblical storytelling, and those who vehemently oppose it for the same reason. At the center of this criticism are differing attitudes toward writing novels based on biblical themes. Diamant has said that her use of Midrash, which calls for the dynamic interpretation of ancient scripture in order to glean meaning that is not immediately evident, is what allowed her to feel confident re-imagining Dinah’s story: “You are supposed to bring every element of your intellect, your emotions, and your imagination to this sort of study…It’s up to us to figure out what it means.”
Yet one of her harshest critics, Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, argues that her Midrashic interpretation “is nothing short of anti-Semitic,” especially, he argues, “in its depictions of some of the characters, such as Jacob, and in its virulent antipathy toward the essential early Hebrew ritual of circumcision.” In Diamant’s interpretation, ordering the circumcision of Shechem’s men is cruel and unnecessary. Dinah is ashamed of her brothers’ dictum and pleads with Shalem not to agree. When Simon and Levi subsequently murder all the men and rampage the city, Dinah places a curse on her tribe and says of her brothers, “[They] are no more to me than the livestock of our youth.” In response, Scolnic writes, “It is very curious why Diamant, who has written several wonderful books celebrating Judaism and Jewish rituals, would depict the Israelite characters in such horrible light while creating non-Israelites who are nothing short of perfect.” However, Scolnic’s criticism is informed by his belief that Dinah was, in fact, raped, and that Simon and Levi’s response was justified because the rape was “of the most heinous kind.” According to the passage of time suggested in the Torah, he estimates that Dinah would have been no older than nine when she left for the city. Scolnic and Diamant have very different emotional responses to Dinah because of their interpretations of the ambiguous details of her story. While Scolnic admits that, “Those who would recreate a female perspective on narratives and laws should be given imaginative space,” he is reticent to agree with the Midrash informing her story.

Scolnic also considers the text anti-Semitic in its lack of forgiveness. In Diamant’s retelling, Dinah leaves for Egypt on her own volition and renounces her blood ties by taking up residence with the family of her slain lover. Genesis 46 gives Dinah final mention in a list of those family members who leave for Egypt with Jacob to visit Joseph. Jacob, or Israel as he is called at this point in the story, is redeemed in knowing that Joseph is alive and prosperous, and desires to see him before his death. It is unclear exactly how much time has passed since the slaying of Shechem’s men, but we can deduce that by the time of the voyage Dinah would have been a grown woman. There is no mention of her progeny in Genesis, though the sons of her brothers are all listed. Dinah may not have had any sons, or she simply might not have had children at all. Nonetheless, her presence in the caravan suggests familial loyalty, what Scolnic might consider a sign of forgiveness. Yet Sheres, in her analysis of the gender dynamics of Dinah’s nomadic culture, suspects that Dinah would have had few options outside of staying within the protective fortress of her family. Sheres examines accounts of men and women in relation to their environment, and concludes:

The external world is portrayed as a world where “strangers” roam free, where there is deception and violence that the women cannot handle but that men can. Women are thus cast into a family framework which is perceived by the text to be protective but which limits the women to biological procreation.

That Dinah’s venture beyond the confines of her tribe purportedly led to rape (or at least a violation of her family’s covenant) would have been reason enough to prevent her further travels and autonomous pursuit of a mate. To say that Dinah forgave her brothers is thus uncertain.

Because of its liberal interpretations, The Red Tent has found much of its readership in the female reform community. The orthodox community has been more critical of Diamant’s use of fiction to tamper with direct translations of the Torah. Again, while Diamant considers
her retelling a form of Midrash (and thus her religious inheritance), the orthodox community makes the distinction between traditional rabbinic Midrash and “Modern” Midrash. In her highly critical article, “Popular Fiction and the Limits of Modern Midrash: The Red Tent by Anita Diamant,” Simone Lotven Sofian argues that Diamant’s inclusion of polytheistic ritual is idolatrous. She writes, “Idolatry or the worship of natural phenomena can not be encouraged by casting it in a positive light” because it “undermines the Bible’s ultimate sacred character.” Critic Naomi Graetz, in turn, argues that Diamant is not undermining the Bible’s sanctity but responding to the lack of direct covenant women have with the divine. By providing these women with a spiritual inheritance, albeit polytheistic, Diamant is creating a parallel to the inheritance of Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. In her book Modern Midrash Unbound: Who’s Not Afraid of Goddess Worship, Graetz argues that “Goddess worship seems to fill a need” in that it personalizes the covenant by creating “feminine metaphors.”

Diamant may not be incorrect in assuming that the women of nomadic tribes would have sustained a polytheistic spiritual culture amongst themselves. According to Sheres, Genesis’ focus on fertility and the responsibility of women to sustain the tribe is indicative of a much richer female culture than the Torah documents. She writes:

Readers of Genesis have been struck by a major issue that keeps recurring in the various narrated sagas, namely, that even though the text is of a patriarchal orientation, all of its significant women seem to be quite powerful, even if that power is of a “domestic” sort.

What is more, Genesis 35 indicates that the members of Jacob’s tribe were practicing god and goddess worship up until the pilgrimage to Egypt and long after the murder of the Hivvite men. Jacob tells his tribe to “Put away your foreign gods that are among you”, a command he feels will both “purify” them and allow him to construct an altar “to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” Thus the relinquishment of polytheism was not a logical conclusion made by the entire tribe, but rather a command by Jacob so that he may find favor with the patrimonial god of his lineage.

In The Red Tent, Diamant does not perceive the obedience of Jacob’s tribe to mean agreement and instead constructs a world in which the diminishment of polytheism and goddess worship is a result of the redactors’ removal of involved feminine narrative.

Diamant begins her retelling of Dinah’s life before Dinah’s birth, when Jacob travels to Laban’s tribe in order to marry one of Laban’s daughters. The events surrounding Jacob’s eventual marriages to both of Laban’s daughters, the birth of his children, and his toils with Laban’s greed, are told with strict adherence to biblical sequence. Dinah’s narration, however, offers these events through the female perspective. For example, Genesis 29:12 states that, upon being kissed by Jacob, Rachel “ran and told her father.” Aside from her hurried behavior, the story tells us nothing about how Rachel might have felt about her encounter with Jacob. Diamant, in contrast, interprets Rachel’s running as deep excitement for the promise of marriage and consummation. “Rachel came running into camp, knees flying, bellowing…she launched into a breathless yarn about a stranger at the well, her words spilling out like water into sand.” Genesis 29:11 states that Jacob “wept aloud” after kissing Rachel but says nothing of Rachel’s reaction, while Diamant writes that “the sound woke Rachel out of her childhood.”
The liberties Diamant takes in animating the women in this story make possible her larger contextual embellishments. The most notable of these embellishments is the worship of fertility and prosperity gods as a means for creating a culture where midwifery and menstruation are considered sacred and mystical. In Diamant’s retelling, Rachel is the daughter of a skilled midwife who dies days after giving birth to her. Rachel later shows a propensity for midwifery and becomes an apprentice to a woman outside of the tribe. But as a child, Diamant writes, “Rachel smelled like water” and “there were hopes early on, that Rachel would be a water witch, one who could find hidden wells and underground streams.”

Diamant is not only providing Rachel a depth of character that is missing in the Torah, but is also suggesting that Rachel lived in a culture where intuitive gifts were valued. Diamant’s fictive description of Rachel derives from Genesis 31:19, which reveals that her father, Laban, worshipped household gods. This passage in the Torah retells Rachel’s theifing of Laban’s gods for Jacob’s tribe just before their departure to Canaan. While Jacob only worshipped the god of his fathers, Rachel’s actions suggest a vested belief in tribal deities. That Laban chases after Jacob’s caravan in order to retrieve these figures is further evidence of their assumed power.

Diamant reinforces the tribe’s polytheistic roots in her descriptions of Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah. While Leah is described as having “weak” eyes in Genesis, she is given a powerful and frightful gaze in Diamant’s rendering. Born with one blue eye and one green eye, “the midwife cried out that a witch had been brought forth and should be drowned before she could bring a curse on the family.”

Diamant further asserts that the tribe would have been exposed to priestly worship of gods and goddesses in Zilpah’s fascination with Asherah, a major northwest Semitic mother goddess who “counseled women.” Though Diamant tells a very different story of Dinah’s experience in Shechem, Sheres’s research suggests that Dinah may have ventured to the Canaanite city to take part in the priestly worship of pagan deities she would have been exposed to in Haran before the departure of Jacob’s tribe.

Diamant describes Bilhah – the daughter of one of Laban’s maidservants and one of Jacob’s secondary wives - as possessing a preternatural intuition. As a child, she predicts the exact time and litter size of a she-goat, giving her a reputation amidst the tribe for “see[ing] clearly.” In Diamant’s interpretation, this “seeing” is synonymous with the skills of the oracles surrounding the tribe who were able to “prophesy or conjure or read goat entrails.”

The larger picture Diamant paints is that of a superstitious and deeply ritualistic culture within the tribe. When Rachel is finally pregnant with Joseph after years of barrenness, Diamant has her sleeping next to Jacob every night, “a shocking breach of manners and an incitement to demons.”

But Diamant also means to reinforce Joseph’s significance in the bible compared to Jacob’s eleven other sons. Though, in Diamant’s retelling, Jacob loves each of his wives, Rachel is his first love and so her late pregnancy is relished.

As the story progresses, superstition and the belief in deity worship becomes a unifying force amongst the female members of the tribe. The Red Tent is forbidden to men and, in Diamant’s rendering, takes on the characteristics of a temple. The women go to the Red Tent in order to rest, to complete their cycle, to give birth, and to pass on the secrets of womanhood to their female children. Their communing is a striking divergence from the often divisive and unceremonious lives of women in the Bible. To avoid complete fabrication, Diamant does include the animosity and jealousy between Leah and Rachel suggested in Genesis. There are
moments of tension involving Rachel’s barrenness and Leah’s immense fertility, but the two women also “divide the duties of a chief wife.” When Leah learns that she is pregnant with Dinah, her seventh and final child, Diamant describes her as physically drained and unhappy. Yet, “[she] did not wish to take this trouble to Rachel, whose hunger for her own baby had not diminished. The fertile wife had tried to spare her sister’s feelings.”

Additionally, Rachel does not ask Jacob to impregnate Bilhah on her behalf in order to compete with Leah. Instead, Bilhah sees Rachel’s anguish and approaches her with the idea. This alteration in the text humanizes Rachel. In Genesis, Rachel is depicted as one-dimensional and greedy. In Genesis 30:14, Rachel asks Leah for “some of [her] son’s mandrakes.” Leah responds, “Is it small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes also?” While Leah’s response is unkind, it indicates the favor Rachel has received for being the beautiful and chosen wife. In response, Rachel flaunts her only leverage and offers Leah a night with Jacob. In contrast, Diamant sees Rachel’s desperation and jealousy as primal. Rachel has attended the pregnancies and births of all the women in the tribe since her marriage to Jacob, and she longs for the corporeal experience of motherhood. Instead of creating a rift, Rachel’s fertility issues become the concern of the tribe. The mandrakes that symbolize the immense power play between Leah and Rachel in the Bible become a lucky charm in The Red Tent. “Of course when anyone, adult or child, found a mandrake – the root that looks so much like an aroused husband – it would be brought to Rachel and handed over with a wink and a prayer.”

Claudia Camp in her book Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible suggests that the priestly redactors of the Torah would have imposed a patriarchal power scheme on the stories of women, which resulted in their being depicted as disruptive and territorial. Camp writes about the pervasive “sense of danger produced by these women [which] persist[ed] at the sociological level, in terms of their apparent tendency to introduce disharmony into the family.” By inserting the possible bond between the women of Jacob’s tribe back into the story, Diamant makes a stirring case for Dinah’s character.

Dinah’s birth is documented in Genesis 30:14: “Afterwards [Leah] bore a daughter and named her Dinah.” Unlike her brothers, Dinah’s name is given no explanation. Yet Diamant is keenly aware that Dinah was not simply the first and only girl of Jacob’s off-spring; she would have been the sole inheritor of her mothers’ rituals. In The Red Tent, Dinah recounts the story of her birth as it was told to her by her four mothers. “They took me out into the moonlight and put henna on my feet and hands, as though I were a bride.” That all four women would have attended the birth reinforces Diamant’s communal rendering of female tribal life. It also suggests the common practice of midwifery within the tribe. As discussed previously, Rachel becomes the sole initiated midwife in her family, a skill she passes on to Dinah. Diamant inclusion of this tradition is validated in the Torah. In Genesis 35:16, a midwife comforts Rachel as she is dying from giving birth to Benjamin. In Exodus 1:15, the King of Egypt speaks directly to the Hebrew midwives and instructs them to kill any male-born Hebrew child. The collective reference to all Hebrew midwives suggests the establishment of a cultural practice, not just a private tradition. It is the likelihood of this tradition that informs Diamant’s interpretation of Dinah’s decision to “visit with the women of the city.”
One of the most significant events in Genesis - Jacob’s wrestling with God and transformation into Israel – is treated ambiguously by Diamant. Similar to the Torah, the event occurs while Jacob’s tribe is sojourning to the land of Canaan to meet his brother Esau and establish his own domain; yet its significance and even the involvement of the divine is called into question. Instead of Jacob courageously surviving the night of wrestling (Gen 32:23) and returning to his family renamed and spiritually elevated, he is physically ravaged and hallucinatory. Dinah recalls:

They found him beaten and naked in the middle of a brushy clearing where the grass and bushes had been crushed and broken in a wide circle around him…I listened through the walls of the tent while my father screamed at a blue river demon and marshaled an army of angels to fight against a mighty enemy that rose from the waters.\(^{30}\)

Curiously, Jacob’s “vision” resembles some sort of evil deity – a force found in nature – rather than a divine and singular god. Diamant’s reinterpretation seems to suggest that Jacob, too, would have been superstitious and influenced by the presence of polytheism. Instead of earning his rightful covenant, he collapses into a fearful torpor, which he attributes to his impending meeting with Esau. Because he stole Esau’s rightful blessing from their father, Jacob is convinced he is finally being punished. This rendering of Jacob as paranoid and timid is antithetical to the Torah’s depiction of his redemption. The touching of “the hollow of [Jacob’s] thigh,” in Genesis 32:25, which determined that the “Israelites [would] not eat the sinew of the hip,” is reduced to Jacob’s hip being knocked out of socket.

Biblically, Jacob’s confrontation with God is meant to be a continuation of the tradition of his fathers and the affirmation of the Hebraic covenant. In Diamant’s retelling, Jacob is not renamed after “wrestling” with a spiritual force because the event is not considered prophetic by the tribe. Dinah and Joseph return to the spot of their father’s attack a few days later and are chased away by a black boar, suggesting that Jacob was merely bludgeoned by a wild animal in his sleep, which would explain his disorientation. Diamant is also reconciling an incongruity in the scripture. Jacob is renamed Israel twice: first at his wrestling with God and secondly during the tribe’s sojourn to Egypt. Only at the second renaming are Abraham and Isaac referenced, an inconsistency that provided Diamant with the leverage to downplay the initial event. Diamant also capitalizes on the close juxtaposition of Jacob’s fear of being “attacked” and “destroyed” for the Hivvite murders with his decision to leave for Egypt. She writes that Jacob, who fled from the wrath of the Canaanites for his “numbers [were] few,”\(^{31}\)

…cowered and took the name, Isra’El, so that the people would not remember him as the butcher of Shechem. He fled from the name Jacob, which became another word for “liar,” so that “You serve the god of Jacob” was one of the worst insults one man could hurl at another in the land for many generations.\(^{32}\)

In a bold reinterpretation, Diamant offers a logical explanation for Jacob’s escape to Egypt and strips him of his spiritual inheritance. She also suggests that the divine covenant between Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was emphasized by the Deuteronical redactors. This interpretation gains credibility in Exodus 3:6, when Moses must remind the Israelites of their spiritual heritage. “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” In
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her book “Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics,” Robin Parry argues that the “call to have no gods but Yahweh, so central to Mosaic Yahwism, is absent from the religion of Abraham, Issac and Jacob.”

Jacob’s call for monotheism and the loyal and sustaining adherence of his followers is therefore called into question.

In a clever twist, Diamant does not abandon the Judaic covenant but rather transfers it to Dinah, who experiences a divine force when crossing the Euphrates during the tribe’s original trek to Canaan.

The water held no threat, only an embrace I had no wish to break. I stood to one side as the ox passed, and then the rest of the animals. I moved my arms through the water, feeling them float on the surface, watching the waves and wake that followed my gesture. Here was magic, I thought. Here was something holy.

Dinah’s experiences could be interpreted as a form of mikveh. The ritual is meant to purify and initiate an individual into the Jewish faith, and must be done in a “live” body of water such as a river or spring. Dinah’s immersion, in Diamant’s story, is thus the official beginning of the matrilineal heritage of the Jewish people. Though the true matrilineal tradition did not begin until the destruction of the second temple, Dinah’s children would officially have been the thirteenth tribe of Israel. Diamant is reclaiming that heritage by providing Dinah, and not Jacob, with spiritual initiation.

Diamant explores the importance of the matrilineal tradition and its lost rituals in the reuniting of Jacob with his mother Rebekah after his voyage from Haran. Rebekah is depicted as an oracle who rules over a band of maidservants like a tribal matriarch. She lives separately from her husband Isaac and serves as a local healer and prophesier. Such details are entirely fabricated by Diamant, yet they are not without textual purpose. By the end of Jacob’s servitude to Laban, Rebekah would have been the principal female scion to Abraham’s tribe and the progenitor of the feminine rituals inherited by Leah and Rachel. Genesis 25:19 describes Rebekah’s pregnancy with Jacob and his twin brother Esau as difficult. The statement, “The children struggled together within her,” is meant to symbolize the “two nations” that would descend from the brothers. Diamant uses this divide to suggest that Esau fell out of favor with his mother because his wives were Hittite women and thus did not adopt Hebrew rituals. This reinterpretation could be considered a Midrash from Genesis 26.34, which states that the women “made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.”

The Red Tent includes a scene in which Rebekah casts out Esau’s wife Adath for not obeying proper ritual practices when her daughter, Tabea, begins menstruating. Adath “wasted” Tabea’s blood by not sacrificing it to the earth and instead “shut her up alone, like some animal.”

Dinah, in contrast, has spent her entire childhood in the Red Tent with her mothers and is thus indoctrinated into a culture that fears and respects women’s cycles and encourages the rituals surrounding them. Leah later explains Rebekah’s wrath to Dinah and reveals a critical distinction between the Hivvite and Hebraic inheritance:

Esau’s wives, the daughter’s of Edom whom Rebecca despises, give no lesson or welcome to their young women when they come of age…They do not celebrate the first blood of those who will bear life, nor do they return it to the earth. They have set aside the Opening, which is the sacred business of women, and permit men to display their
daughters’ bloody sheets, as though even the pettiest baal would require such a degradation in tribute.\textsuperscript{36}

This “Opening” refers to the breaking of the hymen in a private ceremony amongst women and not first sex. This distinction, according to Rebekah, is essential to preserving private ritual and preventing men from declaring ownership over a woman’s virginity. Because Dinah’s mothers have inherited the same traditions as Rebekah, Dinah’s first menstruation involves the return of her blood to the earth and the breaking of her hymen. Thus, in Diamant’s estimation, by the time Dinah goes out “to see the women of the land,” she is considered a fully initiated woman in her tribe.

That the men of Dinah’s tribe did not display a woman’s marriage sheet is central to Diamant’s interpretation that Dinah’s “violation” had more to do with Shalem’s status as a Hivvite and not Dinah’s virginity. But to understand Diamant’s reinterpretation of Dinah’s rape, it is critical to consider the contemporary Midrash on the event. Most troubling to critics is the translation of the word rape from the Hebrew and the contradictory behavior of Shalem after the incident. Genesis 34:3 says of Shalem (Shechem in the Torah): “And his soul was drawn to Dinah the daughter of Jacob; he loved the maiden and spoke tenderly to her.” The suggestion of rape, followed by Shalem’s loyalty to and reverence for Dinah, creates a paradox. The Standard Revised version of the Holy Bible uses the translation “humbled” to describe the incident between Shalem and Dinah. Ita Sheres reveals that the Torah “never refers to Shechem’s act as ‘rape’”\textsuperscript{37} but that the redactors of Genesis, who were committed to a patriarchal and monotheistic tradition, would have taken advantage of “linguistic” signs which indicate that a violent sexual act took place. Diamant transforms the supposed violence into an act of immense passion that is instigated rather than inhibited by Dinah’s innocence. Dinah recalls, “I, who had never been touched or kissed by a man, was unafraid.” Afterwards, Shechem fears that he has caused Dinah pain because she is crying. Yet Dinah responds, “I told him that my tears had nothing of pain in them. They were the first tears of happiness in my life.”\textsuperscript{38} Dinah’s joyous assertion in \textit{The Red Tent} cannot be considered wholly erroneous because she is never directly quoted in Genesis. That Dinah would choose to stay in Shalem while her supposed rapist made great offerings to her father and brothers on her behalf could be considered reciprocation of his affection.

Esther Fuchs, in her book \textit{Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative}, does not directly challenge the rape of Dinah. Instead, she views the violence of Dinah’s brothers as a signal that they were motivated by territorial politics as opposed to retribution. The story in Genesis focuses on Dinah’s rape as a violation of her tribe, further evidence that the true crime was Shalem’s foreignness. Genesis 35:7 states, “the men were indignant and very angry, because he had wrought folly in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing ought not be done.” In Genesis 35:14, the sons of Jacob refuse to allow Shalem to marry Dinah because “We cannot give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us.” That the men of Jacob’s tribe would be the recipients of this disgrace is further evidence that the term “rape” was synonymous with a cultural violation. As Fuchs’ explains, “By broadening its scope to include the institution of the family and the entire nation, the biblical definition turns rape into a crime against the victim’s custodians.”\textsuperscript{39}
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Ita Sheres offers one of the most fascinating interpretations of Dinah’s experience in Shechem. She argues that Dinah would have been old enough to marry by the time Jacob’s tribe settled in Canaan, but that because the tribe was new to the land, Dinah’s marital prospects were slim. To seek out a mate within her tribe was considered incest and a direct violation of Abraham’s covenant. Sheres therefore reasons that Dinah left her tribe in order to seek out connections with women who could find her a suitable husband and argues that Dinah would have been aware that her personal welfare depended on her ability to marry. Sheeres also considers Dinah’s status as the daughter of Jacob’s “unloved wife,” which she argues would have limited Dinah’s marital prospects further. “Dinah [therefore] cannot sit in the house and wait for the right man to come along and offer her his ‘tent,’ because her father Jacob is not interested in her the way he is interested in Joseph, the son of Rachel.”

This theory seems more plausible when we consider that Jacob did not immediately seek revenge upon hearing that his daughter had been raped, but rather waits for his sons to “come in from the field” (Gen 35:5) before acting. Jacob and his sons subsequently debate if Shalem’s offerings redeem Dinah’s violation, indicating that the primary concern was for their own profit and reputation. Sheres’ final assertion is that the redactors of Genesis, strict proponents of tribal loyalty and Mosaic monotheism, would have condemned Dinah for “stepping out of the family line.” And what could have been an act of self-assertion by a woman “loses momentum when the rape occurs.”

Diamant invents and thus asserts Dinah’s strong character by redeeming her coupling with Shalem. However, Diamant chooses not to assume that Dinah was rebelling against her tribe but rather had a perfectly viable reason to “visit the women of Shechem.” As stated earlier, the mention of Hebrew midwives in Exodus suggests an established tradition of which Dinah would have been at least aware. In The Red Tent, Dinah becomes Rachel’s apprentice and must follow her to the city in order to help attend a difficult birth. She meets Shalem during this visit and the two are immediately attracted to one another. Yet they do not consummate their feelings until Dinah returns to watch over the King’s secondary wife whose labor she attended.

Even before her first visit, however, Dinah has a fascination with the city. She says at the beginning of Chapter 7, “I longed to go inside, to see the temple square and the narrow streets and crowded houses.” By verbalizing Dinah’s interest in venturing beyond her tribe, Diamant transfers the power behind the event back to Dinah and away from her brothers and Shalem. In Diamant’s rendering, Dinah has full agency and makes her decision to be with Shalem without the hesitancy and vulnerability of a young girl. Though this interpretation aligns with the values of a contemporary readership, it is the opposite story that the redactors were attempting to tell. Dinah lost her voice and her agency and became a warning to all women that violation of Abraham’s covenant and acts of autonomy lead to violence. Dinah’s ultimate punishment was to disappear. Camp suggests that the redactors punished women by altering the text because women, whose leverage was fertility, challenged the patriarchal structure of monotheism and Yahweh worship.

Women are not only dangerous because of the openings they create for one family’s (culture’s) intrusion into another; they are also problematic precisely because they are not men. Women’s Otherness has to be mythologically confronted in the same way as that of ethnic foreigners, which, indeed, it comes to represent.
In the final chapters of The Red Tent, Diamant resurrects Dinah from her unknown state and completes her life in Egypt. Though the scriptures indicate that Dinah traveled to Egypt with her family, Diamant removes Dinah from that caravan and has her escape instead with Shalem’s mother, the Queen Re-Nafer. Re-Nafer is originally from Egypt and so Dinah’s second “going out” is with the purpose of adopting a new identity and family. Before her renunciation of Jacob’s tribe, she curses the men of her family in a public diatribe. In a tragic and controversial alteration of the story, all four of Dinah’s beloved mothers also suffer her curse and die shortly after her departure. The Torah speaks of Rachel’s death giving birth to Benjamin during the exodus from Canaan. Genesis 35:17 states that Rachel originally named the child “Bĕn-o’ni,” but that Jacob “called his name Benjamin.” Diamant includes that Bĕn-o’ni translates to “Son of Woe,” and that Jacob alters the name in order to hide the accusation. The rest of Dinah’s mothers die from fever and sickness. The death of the grandmother’s of Jacob’s twelve tribes could be read in two ways: either Diamant finds retribution in Dinah’s extrication from the family that betrayed her, or the deaths indicate the usurping of scriptural storytelling by patriarchal redactors and are thus symbolic of the stifling of ritual womanhood. That El and Asherah, the parent god and goddess of tribal polytheistic deities, are replaced by Yahweh in Exodus is further evidence of this stifling.

In The Red Tent, Dinah becomes one of the Hebrew midwives referenced in Exodus. After giving birth to her own son Re-mose – the result of her coupling with Shalem – she seeks a private and humble existence in the home of Re-Nefer’s brother. Yet word of her skill spreads quickly and she is soon considered the primary midwife in her community. Diamant is creating an important parallel between the lives of Dinah and Rachel. While Rachel was the beloved of Jacob, Dinah was the only and thus beloved daughter of her mothers. Rachel was unable to conceive for many years and so found her redemption in midwifery. Similarly, Dinah has a child but is only permitted to care for him as an infant and young boy because Re-Nafer chooses to send him away to school to become an Egyptian scribe. Dinah’s return to midwifery, like Rachel, permits her to earn her keep. Diamant is asserting that, although Dinah was born to Leah, her status as Jacob’s only daughter made her the sole matrilineal connection between Jacob’s tribe and Jewish lineage. Perhaps Diamant is suggesting that Dinah’s true stature should have been considered equal to that of Rachel.

Dinah and Joseph were reunited upon Jacob’s tribe’s arrival in Egypt. Diamant, in turn, reintroduces Joseph into the text and has the two figures meet unexpectedly when Joseph’s wife is in labor and requires assistance. The two, however, do not weep upon each other’s necks, as Joseph and Jacob do in Genesis 46:29. In a strange twist of events, Dinah learns that Joseph is the domineering master of her adult son, who serves as his scribe. While Joseph is glorified in scripture, he is depicted as hardened and cold in The Red Tent. Diamant reasons that the events surrounding his arrival in Egypt and his toiling to gain stature would have hardened his spirit. Diamant also uses his reappearance as an opportunity to expose his responsibility in Shalem’s murder. Re-mose and not Dinah, however, is the one who confronts Joseph:

You are my uncle. Oh gods, what a nightmare…A murderer and a liar. How dare you claim innocence in this abomination? Perhaps you raised the sword yourself, but you did
nothing to stop them. You must have known something of the plot, you and your father and the rest of his seed. I see the blood of my father on your hands. Your guilt is still in your eyes.⁴⁷

According to its critics, the diminishment of Joseph’s character is likely one of the most blasphemous parts of The Red Tent. But at this point in the text, Diamant has called into question the entire patriarchal framework of Genesis, and so Joseph’s pedestrianism is less difficult to imagine. Upon hearing of their father’s failing health, Joseph asks Dinah to travel with him because he is fearful of going alone. He says, “I am a weakling.”⁴⁸ Thus the spiritual power bolstering Jacob’s favorite and most prosperous son is also diminished and, in turn, transferred to Dinah. Their pilgrimage back to Canaan becomes a redemptive act.

This is ritualized in Dinah’s second and final mikveh in the text. During the boat trip, Dinah immerses herself in the water: “the river held me and the moonlight turned the water silver.”⁴⁹ Diamant is both purifying Dinah before she sees her family again – an act that could be considered a symbolic break from them – but also reclaiming Dinah’s right to her Hebrew heritage. In another symbolic gesture, Dinah learns that she has been completely forgotten by Jacob, who names each of his twelve sons on his death bed. However, Dinah discovers that her name is legendary among the female members of her tribe – the daughters of her brothers. Though she does not reveal her identity, she speaks to Gera, one of Benjamin’s daughters, and discovers that the women of the tribe retell her story to one another in her favor. Gera recounts,

The king [of Hamor] brought Jacob a handsome bride-price with his own hands, but it wasn’t enough for Simon and Levi. They claimed that their sister had been kidnapped and raped, and that the family’s honor had been demeaned…[They] tried to undo the marriage by demanding that the Shechemites five up their foreskins for the Jacobites…The prince submitted to the knife! He and his father and all the men in the city! My cousins say this is not possible, because men are not capable of such love.⁵⁰

This portion of the story is arguably most redemptive for female readers. Dinah is no longer “disgraced” and then forgotten for not adhering to the patriarchal standards set by her redactors. And though Dinah’s true narrative is irretraceable (as are so many other biblical narratives), Diamant has offered her female Jewish readers a symbolic connection to their matrilineal heritage through Jacob. Upon returning to Egypt after Jacob’s death, Diamant has Dinah recall something Zilpah once said to her, and finds comfort: “We are all born of the same mother,” a reminder of the community of woman that would have flourished in the Red Tent.⁵¹

It is no surprise that Diamant’s rendering has stirred up controversy. By engaging in Midrash, she has called into question the sacred ideals surrounding Jacob and Joseph while suggesting that Dinah’s spiritual inheritance deserves equal consideration. She is also asserting that the stifling of polytheism contributed to the loss of the female voice in scripture. Whether it is ultimately considered blasphemous or liberating, The Red Tent has contributed to the tradition of biblical reinterpretation through fiction that keeps religious study alive and meaningful to contemporary audiences.

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* Even though *The Red Tent* was first published eleven years ago, the editor-in-chief believes that it is a significant novel, which could be well utilized in Jewish gender studies. Anita Diamant’s official web site offers reading guides, other reviews and FAQ:

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1 Genesis 34:1, *The Holy Bible Revised Standard Version*.


7 Diamant as quoted by Clark, 11.


10 Scolnic, 27

11 Scolnic, 27.

12 Sheres, 55.


15 Sheres, 22.

16 Genesis 35:2.

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17 Diamant, 7.
18 Diamant, 10.
19 Diamant, 9.
20 Diamant, 11.
21 Diamant, 14.
22 Sheres, 135.
23 Diamant, 14.
24 Diamant, 69.
25 Diamant, 65.
26 Diamant, 65.
27 Diamant, 47.
29 Diamant, 68.
30 Diamant, 22.
31 Genesis 34:30
32 Diamant, 208.
34 Diamant, 112.
35 Diamant, 156.
36 Diamant, 158-159.
37 Sheres, 4.

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38 Diamant, 190.


40 Sheres, 83.

41 Sheres, 83.

42 Sheres, 87.

43 Sheres, 86.

44 Diamant, 179.

45 Camp, 194.

46 Diamant, 208.

47 Diamant, 291.

48 Diamant, 304.

49 Diamant, 307.

50 Diamant, 316.

51 Diamant, 318.