DEVELOPING DAVITA: FEMINISM IN SELECTED WORKS OF CHAIM POTOK

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For my mom who kept asking me, "So why does this matter?"

For my friends, past and present, who provided ample opportunities for distraction.

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PREFACE

I began this project in the early part of 2006. While taking a course entitled "Women in Boundaries in Contemporary American Fiction," I was surprised to see a book on the syllabus written by a man. I had thought that I would be reading people like Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Toni Morrison (which we did), but I never expected to see Chaim Potok's name on the required reading list. I was sure that feminist literature could not include a male author. After all, I thought, female development would be better understood by women; and women's oppression was best left to women writers.

For the seminar paper for the course, I compared Potok's Davita and Kingston's narrator from *The Woman Warrior*. My research dealt with the use of storytelling in the formation of identity as well as the confrontations between the Jewish and Chinese cultures, respectively, with the umbrella Western civilization. What I realized during the course of my research was that the two characters were similar, despite my initial thoughts otherwise. My current project springs from that essay because Kingston's narrator and Davita share several connections; and Kingston's novel is acknowledged as being semi-autobiographical. If a female character from a woman and a female character from a man develop in the same way, then my previous understanding of female characters and feminist writings needed to change. When I began this project in depth, I started with a series of questions I wanted to answer, and those questions directed my research:

Is it possible for a male author to write a believable female character? And if so, has Potok done so with Davita? Is it possible for a male author to write a believable feminist character? And if so, has Potok done so with Davita? Are there other male authors who had done something similar?

What purpose could a feminist character have in Potok's novels? What does her development suggest about his beliefs concerning the role of women in Judaism? Why had he intended a trilogy for her[1] and had her character appear in multiple stories?

Why does Potok repeatedly return to Davita? What makes her stand out against his other characters like Reuven Malter and Asher Lev?

What is the significance of Davita and her Biblical counterpart, David?

I encountered immediate difficulties with this project. First, there is limited scholarly research on Chaim Potok, apart from his novels *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev* – although reviews for his fiction and non-fiction abound. It would be safe to argue that Potok discusses his writings from a scholarly perspective more than academics have. I realized that his creation of a female character has not been discussed at length, nor has his semi-biographical link to his characters. No one addresses the fact that Potok works through his confrontations between his faith and secularism through the manifestations of his characters' confrontations. Worse still, I learned that many critics consider Potok an inferior writer when compared to writers like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Bernard Malamud. Rather than turn to scholarly articles and criticisms of Chaim Potok's writings, much of the research for this project is based on sociological,

[1] Prefacing her interview with Chaim Potok, Elaine M. Kauvar mentions that Davita was supposed to be part of a trilogy, which is something that Potok never mentions about any of his other characters (63).

psychological, and biological texts. I chose to research both the realistic experiences of women along side the literary criticism that accompanies female development novels.

Second, I discovered the distinction between "female" and "feminist." If I were to decide if Davita is a believable feminist writer, like Potok claims her to be, then I need first to establish her biological and sociological believability as a female character. Only if Potok represents these aspects well could I pursue the question of Davita's feminism. I also learned that being a "feminist" and being a "Jewish feminist" are also different terms. In fact, historically, the Zionist Movement had divided Orthodox Jewish feminists from the women's movement. In 1957, when the first conference held by the United Nations' Decade on Women established that "Zionism equals Racism," many Jewish feminists were isolated from feminism; "the proposal (which was passed as a resolution of the UN General Assembly and only eventually rescinded in 1991) was the first indication of anti-Semitism in the women's movement" (Baker 209). The division created "a very painful 'double-bind' situation in which Jewish feminists felt unable to remain in the women's movement and yet unable to identity with the 'normative' Jewish community which was seen to silence any public criticism of Israel by Jews" (Baker 210). For Jewish feminists, the feelings of Other were twofold, as woman and as Jew. The Jewish tradition marginalizes women because of their gender; and the women's movement marginalizes them because of their Jewishness.

Although this situation has begun to improve in recent years, the Jewish feminist is still an anomaly among feminists. Recognized Jewish feminists such as Cynthia Ozick and Erica Jong are participants in the Jewish faith. Just as the fictional Davita cannot leave behind her Jewish background, neither can these women. Being Jewish is an

important part of their lives because they see themselves as a part of a larger community. Even Potok admits:

> I find it difficult, at times, to understand why women like Cynthia Ozick and others remain inside the Orthodox camp. At the same time, I can understand why they remain because there's an element of significant texturing there that they can react to, that resonates inside them. So they would rather remain Orthodox Jews and do the changing inside than step outside. (Kauvar 84)

Erica Jong, although not initially interested in her Jewish heritage, creates "a steady progress toward the discovery and acceptance of her Jewish identity, from realizing her Jewishness during her years in Heidelberg in early adulthood" (Templin 126). Charlotte Templin quotes Jong's novel *Fear of Fifty* where Jong writes:

> I began to question my ambivalent relationship to my Jewish identity and the unexamined assimilationism I have written about earlier. It seems astonishing to me that a woman born at the height of the Holocaust should not have been trained to a stronger sense of Judaism. (Templin 126-127)

Davita develops similar feelings about her Jewish faith, a belief which is surprising in contemporary fiction. Most contemporary fiction has characters pulling away from religious beliefs because of oppression or disbelief; but Davita turns toward it. Davita is raised in a Communist, gender-neutral household that encourages learning, but she is not satisfied with the answers about life and death provided therein. As a child, her need for fantasy and imagination is not fulfilled in a home where words like "dialectical materialism, historical materialism, [and] tools of production" are part of the Communist

meetings that her parents hold, and "fly about like darting birds" (*Davita's Harp* 9). A family friend, Jakob Daw, awakens Davita's sense of imagination with his allegorical stories about birds and horses, and her Aunt Sarah provides her with Christian stories and various historical tales about frontier women. Yet it is Judaism which calls to Davita, more so than these other stories.

Living in a Jewish community in New York, she is drawn to the music of Judaism. Hearing the melodies of the Jewish chants and prayers brings Davita into the Jewish faith. In spite of her mother's anti-religious attitude – her mother was once an Orthodox Jew who has since denounced any religion – Davita tells her: "I like their songs though, Mama" (*Davita's Harp* 89). She asserts that, despite her mother's teaching otherwise, she wants to be a part of Judaism. She begins going to the shul[2] and later enters into the yeshiva.[3] When her father dies, she finds particular solace in the eleven-month Kaddish[4] period, finding healing in the chants much like that expressed by Sara Retguer in her article "Kaddish From the 'Wrong' Side of the *Mehitzah.*"[5]

But Davita's faith is unique; it does not exist in a way that fully represents belief in God. She repeatedly tells David Dinn, her friend and later step-brother, that she does not believe in God. And when he asks her to explain, she tells him that she attends shul because she likes to be around the people and their singing, that it "feels good and everything feels like it's being changed into something very beautiful like when I was

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[2] The synagogue. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.
[3] A Jewish school. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.
[4] A prayer of mourning. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.
[5] Retguer comments that although Kaddish is normally said only by men, she found the prayer to be a means for her to work through her grief and maintain her faith: "Did I mean what I was saying? Was I really reaffirming my belief in God's greatness (which is the meaning of the words of the Kaddish prayer)? Not for the first few months. Rather, I battled God every inch of the way. Catharsis came suddenly, violently, but it took almost the full eleven months before I again really meant the words I was pronouncing – meant them on the internal level" (179).

building castles on the beach" (*Davita's Harp* 209). In fact, Potok provides little evidence in the novel that might suggest that Davita ever understands the existence of God as much as she understands the solace that she finds in the traditions and rituals of Judaism.

What I discovered in my research is that Davita's approach to her faith is not unlike many people in the twentieth-century. New discoveries in science and the two world wars created problems for a belief in God, since science seemed to disprove His existence and the wars seemed to disprove His presence. Belief in an all-knowing Creator began to weaken. But these changes in Western culture were only the surface of dilemmas for the twentieth-century Jew. After the Holocaust, the world of Judaism was shattered. Questions about the Covenant between God and the Jews became necessary issues to address: how could God be silent in the face of the genocide of his Chosen people? What had the Jewish people done to deserve this punishment? Was this punishment? Did God see what was happening and do nothing? Did God even exist?

Davita represents a particular problem addressed in all of Chaim Potok's novels: the core-to-core cultural confrontation. Potok argues that people firmly embedded in one culture are forced to reconcile the beliefs of other cultures they come in contact with during their lives. In his novels, he pursues the confrontations that occur when Orthodox Judaism and secular thought collide. Davita moves between the core of one culture (Communism) into the core of another (Orthodox Judaism) and begins to experience the periphery of feminism during *Davita's Harp*. When Davita develops in later stories, we learn that she has moved away from the Orthodox faith but has not abandoned her spirituality.

There is an immense guilt felt in the American Jewish community about the Holocaust. Some people dealt with the catastrophe by denying God; others clung that much harder to their faiths. Chaim Potok, in spite of doubts, clung to his. By remaining observant within his faith and by pursuing a writing career, he is able to work through his crises of faith; although he often admits that he does not have a clear-cut answer for his problems. As in the case with Davita, there can be no reconciliation with feminism and Orthodox Judaism; something new has to occur (Kauvar 84). Because Orthodox Judaism will not allow for a woman to have an active role in Jewish ritual, feminism and Orthodoxy are not compatible.

Of all of his characters' involvement in the novels, Davita's involvement in novels and short stories represents a more comprehensive look at twentieth-century problems for Jews and non-Jews. She exists as a mediator for the unspoken stories of horror and pain that accompany the Holocaust, and the stories of "'what the world is like when there are no rams'"[6] (*Old Men at Midnight* 268). She is the instrument through which we hear her own stories as well as those of Jakob Daw, Noah Stremin, Leon Shertov, and Benjamin Walter. Jacob Neusner writes that "we do not know how to tell the next chapter in Judaism's story. But the past yields one sure lesson: the story will be told, and there will be people who will make that story their own" (271). Contemporary Judaism does not exist in only Orthodox form; Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism exist along side it. The label of "Jewish" is applied to the religious and the non-religious. As Potok's fictional world became larger, he introduced

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[6] The reference to the ram is an allusion to the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Told by God to sacrifice his son, Abraham is about to kill Isaac when God provides a ram to take Isaac's place. The story as told from the perspective of the ram, is told to Davita in the novella "The Trope Teacher" from *Old Men at Midnight* (250-251). The idea is that if there is no one to stand in and change the future of the Jewish people, then Judaism will die out.

more characters who were not content to remain Orthodox Jews in the twentieth century; instead, they choose to retain the traditions, but not the teachings. Davita exists to make the new stories for Judaism, the stories that will allow all Jewish people to reconcile twentieth-century horror with faith.

COPING WITH CATASTROPHE: POST-HOLOCAUST JUDAISM AND POTOK

"Because you would not serve the Lord your God in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything, you shall have to serve – in hunger and thirst, naked and lacking everything – the enemies whom the Lord will let loose against you. He will put an iron yoke upon your neck until He has wiped you out . . . These are the terms of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses . . . " (Deuteronomy 28:47-48).

THE HOLOCAUST AND JEWISH FAITH

In the Covenant between the Jewish people and God, God promises that they will be his Chosen people, given a special place in the world, but only if they can fulfill certain obligations. To be this special people, they must first obey the Commandments laid out to them by God through Moses, obeying with fear and love. If they fail in this regard, then a series of curses will befall them, and "so terrible are these Curses, so vengeful their image of God, that they are chanted quickly and quietly when it comes time to read them" (Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction* 13). The Mosaic Curses[7] remind the Jewish people of God's wrath, as well as his eternal role in their lives. If they experience pain and suffering on a large scale, the curses are reminders that the only time they will experience devastation is when they have sinned. Yet God does not leave them when they sin but promises that if they come back to him and his Commandments, that they once again will have his favor (Roskies 14).

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[7] The curses given by God to Moses that warn the Jewish people of the punishments if they do not obey the covenant. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.

When the truth of the atrocities of the Holocaust emerged, Jews and non-Jews were shocked. Six million Jews had been murdered and with them, the culture and scholarship that had been growing for thousands of years. As in situations of major catastrophe, everyone wanted to know "Why?" Why had so many people been killed? Why had the Nazis not been stopped earlier? Why had the world been silent during the mass attempts at Jewish immigration during the 1930s? But for the Jew, the questions of most importance were: why had God allowed this tragedy to happen? Why had God allowed his Chosen people to suffer in such a way? What sin had been committed? What had the European Jews done that God would punish them with the Holocaust? What was the purpose?

Differences arose among the Jewish people, beyond the divisions between the sects of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed. Tensions emerged between German Jews and East European Jews and between European Jewry and American Jewry. Many of the post-Holocaust immigrants to America, having strictly adhered to their faiths through ghettos and camps, expected American Jews to be as adamant about the Torah as they were. Some sections of American Jewry felt an intense guilt for the suffering of the Europeans and a powerful sense of responsibility to carry on the Jewish faith (Kremer, *Witness Through the Imagination* 15). Post-Holocaust yeshivas were filled with ultra-Orthodox teachings, breeding a fundamentalist Judaism, yet fundamentalism did not provide the answers that the world was looking for at the time. People were not willing to accept or worship an all-knowing, benevolent creator that had allowed the Holocaust to happen.

Crises of faith emerged: could there be such thing as a personal God if He allows his people to be murdered in a situation so horrific that it was perhaps without precedence? Jewish history is marred with violence and discrimination, but none of the recorded acts of violence had ever reached the magnitude of the Holocaust. Monarchs and layman had attempted to remove Jews from different countries, but no one had systematically eradicated them to the extent that Hitler managed. In a poem written in 1951, Uri Zvi Greenberg, a Holocaust survivor, writes:

> Where are there instances of catastrophe/ like this that we have suffered at their hands?/ There are none – no other instances./ (All words are shadows of shadows) –/ *This is the horrifying phrase*: No other instances. ("To God in Europe" III.17-21).

Without an archetype to use to help sift through the trauma of the Holocaust, the Holocaust became an archetype for the Jewish people (Roskies 515). Without any prior instances of suffering in the magnitude of the Holocaust, the Holocaust became a reference point for the loss of faith, for people's struggles with God, and for people's struggle for identity. Jews looked at the world through the blood of the Holocaust. If the Holocaust were punishment for sin, the Jewish people had done something awful because they had never faced destruction and exile to the extent that the Holocaust wrought. An Orthodox rabbi, Elchonon Wasserman, writing in the midst of the war, "interpreted the Nazi onslaught as due to three Jewish 'evils': secular nationalism; assimilation, especially through Reform Judaism; and the alleged contempt for the Torah in the scientific study of Judaism" (Rubenstein 159). According to Wasserman, the outside world had come to affect Judaism, and God was supposedly punishing his people for their faithlessness. Not

everyone agreed with his assessment because the rabbi's perspective eliminates the actions of Hitler, and post-Holocaust Jewry was left to give different meaning to the deaths of so many people.

THE HOLOCAUST AND CHAIM POTOK

The writings that emerged after World War II, from both European and American Jews, felt the impact of the Holocaust. Chaim Potok writes in his history of the Jewish people that the "Jew sees all of his contemporary history refracted through the ocean of blood that is the Holocaust" (*Wanderings* 524). Regardless of whether people directly experienced the death camps, Judaism and its literature would never be the same. The literature written by European Jews who experienced the ghettos takes on a liturgical tone, writing directly to God, wondering where he is and if he will respond. Greenberg's poem wants God "to face the full extent of the horror. And if God refused the role of Avenger, then the poet's pen was the only weapon that could 'rip the clouds apart' and turn the wayward back to Zion" (Roskies 566-7). The European Jewish writers are devout to Judaism, even is God appears not to be.

American Jewish authors do not seem as concerned with bringing the wayward back into the fold and with upholding tradition. Potok illustrates the tension between ultra-Orthodox European Jews and Orthodox American Jews in *The Promise*, in the scenes between Rav Kalman and Reuven Malter. Potok's character Abraham Gordon explains to Reuven the devotion of post-Holocaust Jewish immigrants: "'The concentration camps destroyed a lot more than European Jewry. They destroyed man's faith in himself. I cannot blame Rav Kalman for being suspicious of man and believing

only in God'" (315). Rather than deny God, many Orthodox European Jews cling to their faith in God – otherwise the death of millions signifies nothing. If Jews died for their faith, and their faith is empty, then there is no meaning in anything that happened. Unlike their European counterparts, American Jewish writers focus on the post-war survival of characters – many of whose faith has been destroyed:

> the writers focus on the depression that stems from the guilt many feel for outliving families and friends; the recurrent nightmares and memories of Holocaust indignities, betrayals, and torture; the loss of faith and rejection of obligatory duties and rituals; and the failure to resume prewar ambitions and professions. (Kremer, *Witness Through the Imagination* 20)

Whether as a dominant theme or as a part of the historical background of American Jewish fiction, the Holocaust is present. In the continued narratives of Chaim Potok's fiction,[8] the Holocaust does not occupy the main plot of the stories but instead serves as a backdrop for religious tensions and struggles for identity. His novels focus on the internal struggles between what his characters know and what they experience of Western culture, but he includes areas of Jewish concern, like the Holocaust and Zionism.

In the Asher Lev novels, Asher grows up while his father spends most of his time in Europe trying to rebuild the Jewish community. Asher's wife, Devorah, is a Holocaust survivor, whose painful memories are a concern for Asher. David Malter, Reuven Malter's father in *The Chosen*, works diligently for a recognized state of Israel. Potok provides general information about what David does – speaking at meetings, attending rallies – but never goes into depth about the Holocaust and the Zionist Movement. As

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[8] By continued narratives, I mean those works in which Potok explores the obstacles of the same characters: *The Chosen* and *The Promise*; *My Name is Asher Lev* and *The Gift of Asher Lev*; and *Davita's Harp*, "The Seven of the Address", and *Old Men at Midnight*.

part of the plot, David's involvement with the Zionist Movement affects the friendship of his son, Reuven, and Danny Saunders, whose Hasidic father refuses to let the boys interact on account of David's Zionist leanings. David occasionally speaks about the Holocaust in a manner much like Potok does in *Wanderings*. Recounting the ideas of his father-in-law, Potok writes:

> He thought we could make something of Jewry in America. But it could never be the same Jewry we had once in Europe . . . The central idea of Biblical civilization was the covenant, he said. The central idea of rabbinic civilization was the Messiah. He did not know what would be the central idea, the driving force, of this new Jewry. But it would come, he said. (*Wanderings* 522)

Chaim Potok believed that Judaism was moving into a new era of existence and that because of the influence of modern culture and the Holocaust, Judaism could not survive in an ultra-Orthodox state. Similar to the ideas that his father-in-law expressed, Potok saw Jewish history broken into two parts, that of the Biblical civilization and that of the rabbinic civilization. The third phase of Jewish history would have to cope with the Holocaust, Zionism, and the changing world, and it was up to the new generations of rabbis and teachers to help regenerate Jewry in America and abroad. Potok creates characters who also agree with this sentiment, and many of his novels are devoted to the restoration of Judaism – in some form or another. David Malter suggests a similar need to Reuven:

> "Six million of our people have been slaughtered," he went on quietly. "It is inconceivable. It will have meaning only if we give it meaning. We

> cannot wait for God . . . There is only one Jewry left now in the world . . . It is here, in America. We have a terrible responsibility. We must replace the treasures we have lost . . . Now we will need teachers and rabbis to lead our people . . . The Jewish world is changed . . . A madman has destroyed our treasures. If we do not rebuild Jewry in America, we will die as a people." (*The Chosen* 192)

Potok emphasizes the regeneration of the Jewish people in his fiction and non-fiction. Several of his characters involve themselves in rebuilding European Jewry or in the Zionist Movement. David Malter's words speak to the guilt and responsibility felt by American Jews and also to the need to come to terms with the Holocaust. Aryeh Lev continuously goes to Europe to build yeshivas. And some of Potok's characters are Holocaust survivors.

Several of Potok's characters attempt to deal with the atrocities of the Holocaust. David Malter assists with support for the state of Israel. Reuven Malter becomes a rabbi. Danny Saunders becomes a psychologist and in doing so becomes a "'tzaddik[9] for the world'" (*The Chosen* 280). Aryeh Lev, Asher Lev's father, spends most of his life traveling into Europe to rebuild Jewry. Asher Lev, with his crucifixion paintings, attempts to reconcile pain and anti-Semitism with his art. Davita Chandal becomes a writer, telling the stories of the abused and suffering people of the world. Potok's fictional world is an attempt to rebuild Jewry. However, unlike his contemporaries "Bellow, Wallant, and Elman who focus on physical and psychological traumas of survivorship, Potok, like Singer, examines the religious and theological implications of

[9] A special leader in the Hasidic sect. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.

the concentrationary experience" (Kremer, *Witness Though the Imagination* 305-306). Potok wants to know what happens to a person's faith when God is silent.

CHAIM POTOK AND HIS FICTION

Chaim Potok is no Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, or Bernard Malamud; he has not received the same critical acclaim nor does he approach the same subjects. Because Potok repeatedly uses the same theme and his characters never stray from Judaism, critics consider his fiction to be of a lesser quality than that other authors. Although he is lumped together with all Jewish-American authors, there is no defined set of qualifications for this category: "a superficial view, distant and lodged in meaningless stereotypes perhaps provided by popular narratives in fiction and in film, presents 'typical' features of a Jewish-American. But these prove to be chimeras; there is no such creature" (Wade 25). The term Jewish-American encompasses so many types of people – the religious and the non-religious – that it is difficult to say who is the typical Jew. In spite of the flexibility of the term "Jewish-American author," when most scholars write about Jewish-American authors, Potok is often omitted. In fact, Arthur Sainer admitted that, prior to reading *Old Men at Midnight*, his knowledge of Potok was that he was "middlebrow in comparison with the trio of Roth, Bellow, and Malamud" (29). Unlike his contemporaries, Potok does not write from the periphery of Jewish culture;[10] he is an ordained rabbi and scholar who uses his novels to answer for his own "core-to-core

[10] In an interview with Elaine M. Kauvar (1986), Chaim Potok explains: "I think that what [Philip] Roth is doing is writing about the Judaism and the Jews he knows, and what he knows is essentially a peripheral kind of Judaism and Jewry which is very often in confrontation with peripheral elements of Western civilization" (71). Potok does not see himself as writing about the same type of Jewish experience as other Jewish-American authors. In fact, he later wrote that "*periphery-to-periphery culture confrontation* [is] a rub-up of ignorances that generates effluvia, aberrations, ugliness" ("Invisible Map of Meaning" 42). Unlike his fellow authors who receive much critical acclaim, Potok instead prefers to work from within the core of Judaism, a place that he feels creates a better chance for him to change Judaism.

cultural confrontations." Explaining his idea of core-to-core cultural confrontation,[11] he contends that

> Core-to-core cultural confrontation occurs when an individual is located at the heart of his or her own culture, knows that culture thoroughly, constructs the world through the value system and frames of reference of that culture, and then encounters core elements from another culture. (Chavkin)

Potok uses his confrontations between his faith and the Western world as a springboard for all of his novels, and ultimately his fictions become a series of identity quests in which the confrontations and questions he approaches increase in complexity (Potok, "The Invisible Map of Meaning" 35). Although his characters have to redefine their understandings of Jewish culture, they retain a sense of spirituality that is not often found in Roth or Bellow.

His characters operate from within a core culture and have to face the challenges of twentieth-century thought – Freud, scientific textual criticism, Marxism, and feminism. Stephen Wade argues that the dilemma for the modern Jew is "not in the multiplicity of forms, practices and self-definitions [in Judaism], but in the fundamentalist, entrenched perspectives" (153). Potok's characters do not struggle with the various definitions of Judaism as much as they struggle to come to terms with their faiths and the world around them. They struggle with, as Wade puts it, the fundamentalist, entrenched perspectives.

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[11] I would not argue that core-to-core cultural confrontation is unique to Potok's fiction. Both Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* and James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* have influenced his writing, and both novels deal with the confrontations between a Christian faith and the secular world. He is simply the person who explains cultural identity quests in such a way.

Rav Kalman considers not granting Reuven Malter *smicha*[12] if he approaches the Talmud with scientific textual criticism; Asher Lev cannot be an artist and an active member of his New York Jewish community; the yeshiva Board of Directors denies Davita her rightful award because she is female. Although he has been criticized because his characters do not leave behind their Jewish faith, Potok argues that their adherence to Judaism – in some form or another – is important[13]:

> Remaining observant is a crucial element in all of my books, because once you make the break with that, no Orthodox Jew will consider you a problem anymore. They would rather have you out of the camp and on your own than inside the camp and an observer of the Commandments who does all the other things that they can't understand. (Kauvar 75)

The confrontations between his characters serve as a means to reconcile his questions, but not always to a satisfactory conclusion. Many of his questions remain unanswered, but through his writings, he provides an opportunity for his Jewish culture to change – a change, as mentioned earlier, that needs to happen because of the upheaval of the Holocaust. He does not agree that "blindness to any possibility of new, threatening knowledge [is] the price one must pay for loyalty to one's small and particular world" (Potok, "Invisible Map of Meaning" 34).

In fact, Potok might argue that this blindness is the very thing that would destroy Judaism for future generations. For many Jews, suggesting that the Holocaust was punishment for sins is not an adequate answer. In the opening pages of *The Promise*, he quotes the Rebbe of Kotzk: "If Thou [God] dost not keep Thy Covenant, then neither will

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[12] The rabbinical ordination. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.

[13] Critics contend that Potok uses the core-to-core cultural confrontation theme too often, and that his characters are not realistic because they adhere to their faiths, rather than leave Judaism behind.

I keep that Promise, and it is all over, we are through being Thy chosen people, Thy peculiar treasure" (10). The Kotzker Rebbe reverses the Covenant, first expecting God to provide, to which the Jewish people will respond. Post-Holocaust, it was difficult for some Jewish people to reconcile their sufferings with the concept of a benevolent God; some Jewish writers responded to the Holocaust with a rejection of an omnipotent creator. Like Abraham Gordon in *The Promise*, these people find it difficult to believe in Judaism in the face of the Holocaust. He explains to Reuven: "'A God who worries about every human being, every creature. I find it an incomprehensible notion in the face of what we know about the world and about evil"' (311). In spite of his disbelief in God, he still expresses a need for justification for tribulations:

> "Sometimes I wish there *were* a personal God," Abraham Gordon said moodily.
>
> "Would you pray to Him?" his wife asked with a thin smile.
>
> "I would have someone to shout at." (*The Promise* 298)

In Potok's fiction, Abraham Gordon's words echo those of the Jews who cannot believe in a personal God but still wish to remain good Jews (those who observe the Commandments). In spite of their disbelief, they still want answers for the Holocaust and other twentieth-century events. Although Potok would not have agreed with his character about the nature and presence of God, he creates Abraham in order to demonstrate the varied approaches to Judaism. As a rabbi and scholar, Potok felt a responsibility to his people. His novels, admittedly written to answer his own questions, have a diverse cast of characters, not all of whom remain Orthodox Jews, but all of whom retain some

spirituality. Potok attempts to respond when the Jewish world around him seems to cry out:

> "O God of Mercy/ For the time being/ Choose another people./ We are tired of death, tired of corpses,/ We have no more prayers./For the time being/ Choose another people./ (Kadia Molodowsky, "God of Mercy" ll. 1-7)

How did Chaim Potok address the crises of faith experienced in post-Holocaust Judaism? He created a world of characters who confront the Western culture, while still retaining their spirituality. He "adds his voice to Emil Fackenheim's affirmation for Holocaust restoration through commitment to Judaism and Jewry, since, like Fackenheim, Potok believes that 'the alternative [to Jewish commitment] is to say Hitler succeeded, that everybody died for nothing'" (Kremer, *Witness Through the Imagination* 323). As he created a broader spectrum of characters, he realized that "I had stumbled upon an experience that had not been exclusively mine. Rather, it appeared that I had unknowingly shared it with millions of others. I had filled a universal experience with a particular context ("Invisible Map of Meaning" 8). He discovered that his questions about his faith and twentieth-century developments were shared by Jews and non-Jews and that his core-to-core cultural confrontations were experienced by Christians and Muslims and also by men and women.

CHAIM POTOK AND THE CREATION OF DAVITA

During the years between 1973 and 1977, Chaim Potok and his family lived in Jerusalem, working with the Jewish community. He cites an experience with the building

of a new synagogue as the catalyst for his growing awareness of women and their place in Jewish culture. While building the synagogue, the rabbi, an "old school, European rabbi," wanted a wall built on the balcony to separate the men from the women (Vogel 106). Potok went on to explain that in Jewish custom, as long as the women do not occupy the same space of the floor as the men, there is no need for a wall – the balcony serves as adequate separation. The women from Jerusalem expressed their dislike of the situation, so the synagogue was built without the wall on the balcony. Potok explains further that his experience with the women in Jerusalem was the first moment that he had been a part of a women's movement in a synagogue. He had never seen women voice their opinions about their roles in the community, and "When [he] returned to the States in '77, [he] became increasingly aware of what was happening [with women's issues]" (108). He also admits that having two daughters around helped him not only to write *Davita's Harp*, but to understand women's experiences; their input gave him a more realistic look at women's issues in relation to Judaism (Kauvar 83).

Written in 1985, *Davita's Harp* is the last continued fiction that Chaim Potok began.[14] The creation of Davita marks his first attempt at writing a female protagonist, but a creation that was inevitable. In a 1981 interview, he told S. Lillian Kremer:

> I'm slowly moving away from that nineteenth-century world I talked about, that close, family-centered, tightly structured Jewish world, where indeed the woman does play secondary and tertiary roles. As you move more and more away from the rabbinic tradition, enter more and

[14] He completed the Asher Lev novels with *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990); *I Am the Clay* (1992) was his last full-length novel to introduce new characters; and his last fictional novel, *Old Men at Midnight* (2001) gives Davita her final appearance in his work, despite his repeated mentions of creating other novels with her as a character. Chaim Potok died in 2002.

> more into the secular world, the secular Jewish world, the secular world generally, you have to deal more with the role of women. (33)

Reviews praise *Davita's Harp* for being his "bravest book"; however, very few scholars or critics question his use of a female character or his ability to construct the beginnings of a feminist writer (Cowan 12).[15] The entry on Chaim Potok in the *Twayne's United States Authors* collection gives a sentence-long criticism of Potok's brief mention of Davita's experiences with menstruation, suggesting that he "presents the beginning of Davita's menstruation without quite enough stress upon the emotional upheaval which this physical change is likely to cause"; however, no one consults biology or psychology texts to establish if menstruation is worthy of the emotional response that he suggests (Abramson). Apart from that mention, little scholarship has been put into whether Potok creates a believable female character, much less a feminist one, in Davita Chandal. The reviews for *Old Men at Midnight* do not pose these questions either. Nor does anyone posit on the many times that Potok refers to this particular character and the various works he had intended but because of his death was unable to write.

If representing true femininity[16] is the realm of women that very few men can express, is Potok part of those very few? Is he one of few men who is not afraid of his femininity (Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 255-6)? My thesis shows that his creation of Davita is no different than the creation of female characters from authors like

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[15] In his interview with Elaine M. Kauvar, Potok explained that his novels up to that point had been setting the groundwork for later projects: "I have my cast of characters [:] a psychologist, Danny Saunders; a talmudist, Reuven Malter; I also have a Bible scholar, David Lurie; and artist, Asher Lev; a mystic, Gershon Loran. Now I have a feminist writer; that's what Davita's going to be" (67).

[16] When I write of femininity, I mean to write of an aspect of being that goes beyond anatomy and that includes aspects of women's socialization: intended roles for women and use of language. However, just as defining "Jewish-American" is difficult, categorizing the term "feminine" is equally so. Hélène Cixous argues that "it is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 253).

Geoffrey Chaucer and Henry James. In the Davita stories, Potok creates a believable female character who experiences the "Otherness" associated with being female, as well as the biological developments, like menstruation, and the social developments, like mother-daughter relationships, associated with women.

I will also discuss the specific experiences of Jewish women as they relate to Davita. I will argue that the Davita stories are feminist in two ways: not only is she a feminist character, believing that gender should not affect people's roles in life, but the works are feminist in regards to Potok's decision to use a female character to address a wider range of Jewish concerns. While each of his novels explores his concept of core-to-core cultural confrontation, Davita is the character through which Potok explores the range of questions and sufferings of the world; he examines the tensions of Marxism and Judaism, feminism and Judaism, and questions of faith. Davita is unlike his characters Reuven Malter and Asher Lev in that she encounters more people on the periphery of Judaism and Western culture and is able to give voice to the unheard suffering of many. Potok expresses a desire to return to Davita because she, out of all of his other characters, is the most versatile. Potok creates a character who enables him to explore his various questions of faith; as Davita develops, she becomes a blend of fact and fiction, addressing issues of gender, identity, and faith. She is the storyteller who gives a voice to the world, Jewish and non-Jewish, that wants to know "Why?"

WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT: THE FEMALE AND THE FEMINIST IN DAVITA

"The central character of a feminist novel must be female and must represent women generally as well as woman specifically. In so drawing their characters, all the authors of feminists novels implicitly or explicitly portray women as a group oppressed." – Judi Roller[17]

MALE AUTHORS AND FEMALE CHARACTERS

Prior to the last half of the twentieth century, the accepted canon in literature was male-dominated by both male authors as well as male characters. It has been only in the last thirty years or so that more female authors have been accepted into anthologies and entire courses have been taught about a woman's perspective. In spite of the lack of female authors, female characters have always been a part of canonical literature. From the ladies of courtly romances to the witches who plague men, women have usually played a limited role in canonical literature -- that of saint or sinner, virgin or whore, mother or witch. Judi Roller argues that "the women characters that men create never represent anyone with whom the female reader can identity" (3). The characters are often flat and lifeless, without the complexities found in women like Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier or Toni Morrison's Sula. The typical two-dimensional woman either aids men in becoming better or vexes them; she is the object rather than the subject of the narrative. She takes a behind-the-scenes role as the men struggle through the problems of the world.

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[17] From *The Politics of the FEMINIST NOVEL* (4-5)

However, throughout the centuries, there have been male authors who give female characters a new life, developing them beyond the two-dimensional types, providing a tradition of male-authored female *feminist*[18] characters. The tradition includes authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, and Henry James. Each of these men wrote about female characters who defied the understood conventions of female and feminine. What we read from their female characters is the beginning of a female-centered consciousness that must be discovered by male authors: "there are some men (all too few) who aren't afraid of femininity" (Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 256).

In Chaucer's age, female characters changed: "they were portrayed as individuals, rather than as types, and their characters explored in depth; they finally occupy the literary prominence once reserved for men only" (Haskell 5). Chaucer reconstructs stories that originally portray women as objects, and he turns them into stronger characters, demonstrating one of the earliest feminist leanings in male-authored literature. For example, he "frequently reveals keen interest in the strength of women, rather than their weaknesses. He stresses this fact through such characters as Griselda, Constance, Virginia, and May" (Haskell 10). Chaucer's most well-known female character, the Wife of Bath, demonstrates feminist leanings when she tells the pilgrim that all women want sovereignty over themselves and the household. But his women stand apart from the other female characters of the era, who were objectified characters. As literature

[18] I mean to define feminist character much in the same way that Judi Roller explains the feminist novel in the opening quotation. The women from Chaucer, Shakespeare, and James are not feminists in terms that we would understand from today's feminists, especially since feminism has become such an ambiguous term in the last thirty years. It is important to remember that "as an ideology, feminism incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and possesses an international scope, one whose development stages have historically been dependent on and in tension with male-centered political and intellectual discourse but whose more recent manifestations transcend the latter" (Offen 150). Their female characters are women who represent women generally (as oppressed) and specifically (within that particular era and culture). Their characters do not exist solely as objects for men, but take active participation as the subjects for the stories and as active participants in the stories.

developed, sonnets portrayed women as unattainable love (or lust, depending on your perspective) interests, but Shakespeare created "heroines cast in the new mold – positive, strong, often well educated, and with a significantly different attitude toward themselves and their place in society" (Dunn 26). Margaret is the only woman who survives through the Henry VI tetralogy, and she attempts to voice order in the chaos; Juliet proposes marriage to Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*; Beatrice vocalizes the need for equal pairing in marriage in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

When Roller argues that there are very few male-authored female characters who inspire women, she presents the one of the biggest problems in American fiction about women. America does not have a literary tradition that has empowered women:

> for the American novelist the problem of envisioning significant roles for women is compounded by the existence of a native literary tradition that – with notable exceptions like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James – has always emphasized the masculine and neglected the feminine.
>
> (Matinson 298)

In the realm of American fiction, a male author who receives the most praise from critics for his female characters is Henry James. His women represent the "sex meant to act as the consummate artist who paints upon social canvas the full portrait of her character, thereby endowing it with the only value it has" (Banta 240). His female characters, in spite of the oppression around them, try to make a place for themselves among men because unless they do, no one else will. In fact, James' novel *The Wings of the Dove* played a significant role in the emerging fiction about women: "American novels came to be peopled by young women with the talents of Kate Croy who, unlike [Millie], cannot

wait for moment . . . But most of the women in the novels before World War I wait on" (Banta 244).

Most male-authored female characters, in spite of the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and James, continue to fall into the two-dimensional categories. Women are depicted as either sexual beings or saintly, as either intellectual or beautiful. Martha Banta argues that, even with positive female depictions like those of James, "the praise granted to handsome minds is muted and less frequent. What stands out is that the good head (where it *is* admired) had usually been severed from the physically enticing body" (247). Male-authored women are usually the objects. This is why Judi Roller contends that "differences in the development of female characters are only one of many disunities between novels written by male and female authors" (3).

However, is it possible for a male author to create a believable female character in both biological and social experience? If his character develops in a way that is recognized as being distinctly female, would he then be able to explore writing a feminist character? Can a man write a feminist novel? Karen Offen would say yes: "[feminism] must also include men whose self-concept is not rooted in domination over women" (152). Charles and Martha Matinson, in their article about women in contemporary fiction, contend

> that only a few writers have begun to see beyond those rigid concepts of sexual identity that have always implied inequality and denied women the freedom of action accorded to men, and fewer still have gone so far as to examine the grounds for a commonality of experience. (313)

What is important here is the acknowledgement that men have been able to work around concepts of gender and create female characters, and more importantly, that feminist issues can be the concerns of men. Yet, can these ideas work from within a Jewish tradition?

Although Jewish apologists will argue that the Orthodox Jewish faith is not oppressive to woman, Jewish feminists argue otherwise.[19] The argument that Jewish men and women participate in different but complementary roles does not address the limits placed on a Jewish woman's allowed spiritual activity (Baker 35). Like in the Western world, Judaism also places woman between two types: the Lilith (sin, the temptress) and the Shekhinah (the presence of God, the mother, the wife) (Baker 43). And although women may not have been excluded from participating in Judaism in the earlier Biblical period,[20]

> by the Mishnaic times, possibly as a result of the Hellenistic influence on Jewish society, women were less well-educated than they had been in the earlier Biblical period; they had also gradually became excluded from public life and less important in the structure of society. Consequently, they now had a lower legal status than that of men. (Baker 46)

The resulting effect was that post-Mishnaic women may not have known as much about the Jewish Bible and law to have a voice in the society, and over time, women's exclusion would have been an accepted part of Jewish tradition. Women are excluded

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[19] Please note that I am specifically referencing Orthodox Judaism, rather than the Conservative, Reformed, or Reconstructionist branches. These branches of Judaism have attempted to reconcile feminism within the Jewish tradition. If I refer to Judaism without the qualifier "Orthodox," I am not writing of Judaism as a whole but specifically the Orthodox.

[20] The Biblical period in Judaism includes Genesis through Deuteronomy (the Torah) as well as Jewish history through the monarchs (Saul, David, and Solomon). The Mishnaic period is the time when the oral law that accompanied the Torah was codified; the dates for both of these periods vary between sources.

from various spiritual rituals in Orthodox teaching, and "most traditional Jewish men (as most men in general) are fearful of feminism, a fear that emerged in joking, trivializing, and at times, rage. They view feminism as a threat" (Bauman 92). Feminism is considered a threat because it demands a place for women and an acknowledgement that at one time they held positions as judges and prophetesses, not just as wives and mothers. Jewish feminism recalls that "the biblical period admired the matriarchs' [i.e. Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel] tribal cunning. If it hadn't been admired, they would have written it out of the Bible" (Kauvar 83).

Chaim Potok's experience with feminism did not occur until the 1970s, during his trip to Jerusalem. Up to that point, he had not considered the different places for men and women to be an issue. However, he remarked in an interview in 1997 that

> there is no question at all that the rising tide of feminism sensitized me in the past I would say decade, decade and a half, to how it is that women feel. There is no question at all. I would, in all candor, have to say that prior to this, indeed I was not sensitive to it. (Vogel 108)

He goes on to explain that he now approaches lectures with more awareness of gender-inclusiveness than before his encounters with women's struggles within his faith. Approaching all of his novels from the idea of core-to-core cultural confrontation, Chaim Potok's novels attempt to reconcile Judaism from the core (participants who observe the Commandments and have faith) with the Western world around him. By the 1980s, after the women's movement had affected Potok and his understand of Judaism, Davita emerged.

Potok has admitted that *Davita's Harp* is about "a confrontation between two potent fundamentalisms, two contrary mappings of the world: Jewish Orthodoxy and Marxist ideology" ("The Invisible Map of Meaning" 35). For most of the novel, Davita navigates between the teachings of her parents and that of the Jewish world. However, Davita experiences more than the conflict between those two ideologies. Her budding feminism emerges in conflict with various Jewish rituals. As the novel closes, and Davita is denied the Akiva Award because she is female, the novel treads on the confrontation between feminism and Judaism. And as Davita develops further, she becomes a feminist character. Unfortunately, because Potok died in 2002 without completing his Davita trilogy, his development of Davita as an older character has to be inferred from the short stories in which she plays a role.

Yet the questions remain: does Potok create a believable female feminist character? Does Davita's early development mirror that of girls? Is *Davita's Harp* a feminist novel? In this chapter, I intend to explore Davita's narrative development next to the development of other female characters in literature. I will document Davita's biological and psychological development within the terms of her home, Western culture, and Jewish culture. I will argue that because her development at home is founded in a gender-neutral ideology, Davita develops without an understanding of the limitations placed on women in the Western and Jewish worlds. She gradually becomes aware of the limitations of being female in the course of *Davita's Harp*, through her experiences with males in a physical, intellectual, and religious setting. By creating a believable Davita, I contend that Potok creates a feminist character and narrative and that he does so with a purpose.

DAVITA AND FEMALE DEVELOPMENT

The Davita narratives begin in *Davita's Harp* when she is seven years old.[21] The novel follows her development as a female and as a Jewish girl until she is about fourteen. During the course of the novel, Davita's narrative parallels the female development novel, and she undergoes the biological and sociological developments associated with female development. Since 1920, the female novel had been concerned with self-discovery and the search for identity (Gardiner 347). A girl's quest for identity is often associated with nature, since "women have been seen in centuries of Western writing as the sex which is psychologically closest to nature" (Greene 76). Nature is the place that female characters turn to for renewal from the constraints of the patriarchal society around them; nature aids in "keeping her in touch with her selfhood, a kind of talisman that enables her to make her way through the alienations of male society" (Pratt 21). We see this connection to nature with Davita in *Davita's Harp*, "The Ark Builder" and "The Trope Teacher."

When Davita walks into the pond at Prospect Park, almost drowning, her Aunt Sarah takes her north to the countryside for her to heal. For days she is feverish, but eventually the fever breaks, and she returns to her life with a sense of renewal. In "The Ark Builder," Davita takes Noah Stremin to Prospect Park to teach him English. When they go rowing on the lake, she sees images of her father and Jakob Daw as she listens to Noah tell his story. While on their visits to the park, she encourages his drawings and in

[21] Also note that the novel opens around 1935, well before an established "feminist" movement had begun. I state this to suggest that Davita, without a movement to identify with her feelings of gender inequality, represents a unique character in contemporary feminist girl novels. The time frame is also important to note because at this point in Jewish history, the branches of Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist had yet to develop a response to feminism.

doing so encourages Noah to heal his psychological wounds. He begins to relate his story to Davita not while they are at her apartment, but while they are rowing on the lake. When Benjamin Walter visits Davita, in "The Trope Teacher," he finds her in her yard, tending to the overgrowth and contemplating a garden. She is almost omnipotent in this story, a nature goddess of sorts, and Benjamin imagines her to be youthful and beautiful, when in reality she is older. Her associations with nature bring healing to herself and to others, but this relationship with nature is only one attachment that she forms while developing as a character.

In the quest for identity, women often develop in terms of relationships and attachments to individuals or to a whole people, and often, the loss of these attachments adversely affects a woman's understanding of herself (Flynn 434, Gardiner 352, Gilligan 169). Davita's need for self-identification is a main theme in the novel and the short stories, and her definitions of self and the world come from her interactions with others. She first defines the world through her interactions with her mother and father, then with political activist Jakob Daw, and then with Judaism; and when she is older, she defines the world through the stories of others. She is involved in the core-to-core cultural confrontations between Marxism and Judaism, but there are also a series of other issues that Davita encounters while trying to understand her identity: anti-Semitism, death of a loved one, sexism, sexual harassment, fascism, imagination, and Christianity. Not all of Davita's encounters are negative, but she has to sort through all of them while trying to develop. Even as Davita ages, she continues to struggle with defining her identity, most notably in "The Seven of the Address": "she had come recently to a crossroads in her work, and then had halted, feeling witless, wrung dry" and she calls the period "Muddy

Bottom" (77, 78). It is no wonder then that "the quest for female identity seems to be a soap opera, endless and never advancing, that plays the matinees of women's souls" (Gardiner 348).

Annis Pratt, in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (1981), notes that "in most of the novels of development it seems clear that the authors conceive of growing up female as a choice between auxiliary or secondary personhood, sacrificial victimization, madness, and death" (36). With Davita, Potok particularly focuses on the notion of secondary personhood and sacrificial victimization. She is given some of the same choices as she enters into Judaism and realizes the limitations placed on her within the Orthodox culture. Although her step-father, Ezra Dinn, and her mother want to fight the decision to give the Akiva Award to another, they can do nothing. Davita has to sacrifice the award she should have won in order to placate the yeshiva Board of Directors. Losing the award because of her gender, Davita finally comes to a point in her life where she can no longer maneuver around Jewish law or find a tear in the Mehitzah (the curtain separating the men and the women in Orthodox Jewish synagogues).

Pratt suggests that female-authored female characters clash with society, and like those characters, Davita finds that her hopes for her future "conflict with the expectations and dictates of the surrounding society. Every element of her desired world . . . inevitably clashes with patriarchal norms" (Pratt 29). In a culture where men are required to be the educated ones in the affairs of the world, Davita does not have a place. *Davita's Harp* closes without revealing whether Davita remains a part of Orthodox Judaism, but Potok explains that she cannot reconcile Orthodox Judaism and her budding feminism: "it's not going to work. It doesn't work; and what Davita ends up doing is becoming a

writer while remaining a traditional non-Orthodox Jewess. She has a really radical break with fundamentalism in her early twenties" (Kauvar 84).

Although Davita's choices within Orthodox Judaism parallel the choices that Pratt suggests female authors tend to give their protagonists, Davita chooses to step away from the patriarchal Orthodoxy in search of better options. She has to escape because she cannot exist in the Orthodox culture as she understands herself. Judi Roller maintains that

> The majority of [feminist] novels end in flight and escape or death, literal or symbolic . . . The problems confronting the heroines always stem from their lives in patriarchal, capitalistic, modern societies . . . Flight or escape for the heroines of the feminist novel does not suggest that in lighting out for new territory, she is a "fugitive" from the central concerns of modern life. Instead it signifies that dealing with society is impossible. (102)

Potok does not provide the narrative in which Davita escapes Orthodoxy. In "The Ark Builder," she is still a part of an Orthodox household, but by the time of "The Seven of the Address" and "The Trope Teacher," Davita has left behind Orthodoxy, but not the traditions of Judaism. Her adherence to Judaism mimics a real-life example narrated to Adrienne Baker, author of *The Jewish Woman in Contemporary Society*: "I have no religious commitment based upon a belief in God but I have a tremendous religious commitment in terms of Judaism" (40).

As mentioned before, the approach of feminists and Jewish feminists varies slightly. While both groups experience the oppression of patriarchal systems, it is the contemporary Jewish feminists who cannot let go of religion. Although Cynthia Ozick

and Erica Jong do not agree with the status of women in Orthodox Judaism, they remain a part of the Jewish faith. Because Jewish women feel the guilt of the Holocaust, they feel the need to remain a part of the Jewish tradition. However, because the Jewish tradition limits the roles of women in spirituality, women have to find a new definition for their spiritual place in the culture. Even Jewish-American women writers search for spirituality that

> is not realized within the familiar terrain of the rationalistic, relatively egalitarian, modern Judaism that dominates American Jewish religious terrain. Rather, their outsider status is inscribed in their exploration of outback territories of the eccentric, the errant, the marginal, and the mystical. (Glazer 129)

Once Davita develops into a feminist writer, Potok reveals that she, like Ozick and Jong, seeks her spirituality through the outsider. Her published stories represent people on the margins of Jewish and Western culture. Even the stories she imagines as a young child are unusual, even mystical given the references to the magic of the door harp and its ability (as imagined by Davita) to house Jakob Daw's black bird, the bird from Picasso's *Guernica*, the horses from the paintings in her room, her dead father, and the deceased Jakob Daw. The narrative development of Davita follows much in tune with the accepted development of female-authored female characters in twentieth-century literature; however, *Davita's Harp* gains another level of believability because the narrative includes her experience with menstruation.

In order to discuss Davita's believability as a female character, however, it is impossible to avoid the topic of menstruation. Because it is a part of a woman's

development, no young woman's novel would be complete without some mention of menarche. Some theories suggest that a woman's life is defined

> in terms of her arrival at womanhood, at menarche, her becoming a mother and the cessation of menstruation at menopause . . . far less attention therefore is given to her finding her own identity . . . finding a job or retiring. Yet all of these events and processes are widely discussed as important life events for men. (Greene 79)

Under patriarchal assumptions, a biological definition of women's lives might be correct. If women are to be wives and mothers, then their development would be affected more by menstruation than by the need to discover their identity. In fact, their acceptance into society would depend on their adherence to the understood cycles of female as child, as mother, and as elder. Men, on the other hand, are responsible for the public realm, so their lives are measured by their achievements within their societies. Yet, if women were more than wives and mothers, would menarche play a significant role? Sheila Greene goes on to point out that

> the meaning of menarche varies widely. Some girls are delighted by it, some neutral, some dismayed, and no doubt for many there is a mixture of reactions and feelings. Exactly what determines the quality of their response seems to be difficult to pinpoint. (82)

A woman's interpretation of her menstruation experience depends on her culture, but even more so on the perspectives of the women around her. The reactions of a girl's mother, sisters, or other women, affect how the girl will approach menstruation. However, many feminist writers approach menstruation with a "minimalist view of the

impact of menstruation on a woman's life" because society tends to view a menstruating woman as a "poor thing in the grip of 'raging hormones'" (Greene 84).

Again, because the attitudes toward menstruation vary from person to person, there is no set example for the experience. Davita biologically develops as a female character in her awareness of the opposite sex and through her experience with menstruation. As she gets closer to her first menstruation, she acknowledges an awareness of the opposite sex, so she has to remind herself "never to look too long at the nipples on [David's] chest or the bulge in his bathing suit as we sat together or lay on the sand after a swim" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 309). Channah, her mother, provides a matter-of-fact approach to menarche, as does Ezra Dinn, her stepfather. Nevertheless, her experiences inside her home – the jubilation of her becoming a woman – are not shared by Judaism and the Western world.[22] Menstruation carries myths about uncleanliness in both cultures, a reminder to women that they are unequal to men. In spite of the conflicting messages about womanhood that Davita receives, Channah provides her with the strength of mind and character to deal with menstruation and much more. When Davita first experiences menstruation, she turns to her mother:

> At home my pain was severe and I went to the bathroom and pulled down my panties and sat on the toilet. Then I looked down and saw the blood. I felt a trembling shock of fear and a sudden soaring sense of excitement. Sitting there, my panties down around my ankles, I called out, "Mama!" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 351-2)

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[22] In fact, in Bernard Malmud's *The Fixer*, the main character, Yakov Bok decides to not have sex with a woman because she is menstruating, and thus unclean . Although sexual activity is not a blatant topic in *Davita's Harp*, neither Ezra or David ever comment on the uncleanliness of menstruation around Davita.

DAVITA AND FEMININE EXPERIENCE

When the narrative of *Davita's Harp* begins, Davita provides a basic family history, from which we gather that her early development is isolated from others her age by her parents' Communist beliefs and activities. She has no acquaintance with her grandparents on either side – her mother's parents are dead, and her father's parents want nothing to do with them. They never live in one place for long, and constantly move on account of their associations with Communism; she remarks that "the apartments we lived in changed often, but my parents' friends seemed to remain the same" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 9). Communism and its place in her family are the only constants in Davita's early development.

Her early experiences with the negative attitudes toward Communism are veiled by her eight-year-old perspective. She recalls moving twice in three months, noticing that a mover who sees the titles of her parents' books is disgusted, and being evicted because her parents are too loud in the meetings held in their apartment. However, she never expresses an understanding of why they always move. She grows up around Communist beliefs but has no understanding of the Western world around her. Her home is filled with words like "Hitler, Stalin, Roosevelt, Mussolini, Trotsky [and] Brownshirt gangsterism, black-shirt murderers [and] Unions, bosses, capitalists. On with the struggle!" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 9). Davita's home is an intellectual place, and she develops with a mother who

> explained words to me in a special way. She would give me the present meaning of the word and a brief account of its origin. If she did not know

> its origin she would look it up in the dictionary in the bedroom near my father's desk. (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 8)

Channah does not treat Davita as if she is a child who does not understand the complexities of Communism. She wants her daughter to be well-educated, so she creates an environment in which Davita's intellectual prowess matures. Yet, Davita's education at home involves more than the principles of Communism; Channah and Davita's father Michael create an environment that is gender-neutral and in which their daughter Davita does not develop in a stereotypical girlish manner. Davita is never told to focus on her physical attractiveness, is never told that her only available option is marriage, and is never told about the patriarchal world around her. When the mover stares at Channah in disgust, Channah stands her ground: "She came below his shoulders in height but met the look defiantly, craning her neck and staring at him until he turned away" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 6). From Channah, Davita learns to educate herself and to defend herself, even if she is smaller in stature. Davita's experiences at home become the basis for how she deals with her later confrontations with the Western world and the Jewish tradition.

The early scenes between Channah and Davita are significant in the latter's character development because identity theory contends that

> each child very early on forms a "primary identity" in response to the expectations implicitly expressed by its first caretaker, usually the mother. The core identity sets the pattern according to which the person thereafter relates to other people and to the world. (Gardiner 350)

In fact, Channah and Davita's relationship is particularly relevant because daughters tend to form their primary identities based on their mothers; the mother-daughter bond is

crucial in the unending formation of female identity (Flynn 426; Gardiner 349). A young girl's sense of femininity is also influenced by her mother, and "by the age of 6 or 7 girls are motivated to behave according to the prevalent models of feminine behavior" (Greene 107). Channah thus provides a unique model of feminine behavior for Davita.

In the novel, Davita often describes her mother in an intellectual setting: her mother leads meetings, speaks at seminars, and conducts small group studies. Channah provides a source of female strength for Davita. When describing her parents, she remarks that "everyone liked my father; everyone seemed awed by my mother" (10). And although Michael often travels as a journalist, leaving Channah and Davita home, we are never to believe that Channah is the weaker sex for staying behind. She continues to work for the Communist cause, handing out political tracts and organizing meetings. The Communist beliefs in the Chandal household make it difficult for there to be gender inequality; Channah tells a group, "in the capitalist family, the husband is the bourgeois, the wife the proletariat" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 20). We are to understand that these distinctions do not exist in Communist homes, at least not in the way the Channah describes them. It is Channah, not Michael, who commands the attention of the masses.

Channah's strength falters when Michael dies. When she first learns that he has gone missing, she tells Davita: "We will be brave, Ilana. We will not act like hysterical women. We will be brave and calm. Won't we? Won't we darling?" (183). Although she tries to maintain her composure in spite of his death, she falls into depression and isolates herself from Davita. It is here in the narrative that the family friend Jakob Daw becomes a key influence in Davita's development. Channah also falters when Germany and Russia sign the nonaggression pact because she does not understand why a

Communist leader would agree with a capitalist or sign a pact with an imperialistic anti-Semite. Again, she isolates herself from Davita, becoming depressed and agitated. She repeatedly wonders: "'What shall I do?'" (298). Davita has to watch her mother reconstruct her own identity from shambles. When Davita deals with severe conflict (the deaths of her father and of Jakob Daw and the denial of the Akiva Award), she mimics Channah's approach to stress: she withdraws herself and becomes sickly, only to reemerge stronger. Their approach to their moments of rebirth is quite like that of other women's fiction: "the rebirth journey entails risk and psychological danger, as likely to lead to madness as to renewal" (Pratt 142).

In spite of the moments in the narrative where Channah's female strength weakens, she is a positive influence in Davita's development. Rather than ban Davita from reading the Christian children's Bible given to her by Aunt Sarah or from attending the synagogue, Channah responds: "I don't even want you to go to that synagogue .... But I won't stop you. Not if [saying Kaddish] means that much to you"' (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 135). Her statement may read like a quiet resignation that Davita will do what she wants; however, Channah supports Davita as she enters into the Jewish faith – although she does not agree with it – and she attends the final Kaddish that Davita says for her father. Channah remains a positive influence in Davita's life, even after Channah marries the devout Ezra Dinn.

When Channah marries Ezra Dinn, the influence on Davita is equally as positive as that of the marriage of Channah and Michael. Davita gives no indication that the new arrangements in her home will change her ability to learn, although Ezra's strict

adherence to the Commandments brings order to her life. Describing her new home, Davita comments that Ezra

> did not read the Sunday comics or stories or novels, but was never disdainful toward those who did. He treated my mother with tenderness and respect. I liked him, my new father, Ezra Dinn, and was not sorry my mother had married him. (312)

Although her family becomes observant Orthodox Jews at this point in the narrative, Davita still does not endure any gender inequality associated with the patriarchal Jewish traditions, at least not within her family. Ezra Dinn is supportive of all of his family. He even attempts to find out why Davita has been refused the Akiva Award.

When Davita's body begins to mature, Channah openly speaks to Davita about menstruation. Davita reports that her mother:

> gave me a dictionary lecture about the word menstruate, its origin and meaning, and a biology lecture on what would soon be happening inside my body . . . "When it starts," my mother said, "you will have become biologically a woman. I'll show you how to take care of yourself." (314)

When Davita finally begins to menstruate, the event does not isolate her from anyone in her family; in fact, her mother approaches the situation calmly and supportively, and Ezra Dinn is equally supportive: "he gave me the gentlest of looks at the start of supper that evening and kissed my cheek" (352). Channah addresses menstruation, not as an emotional upheaval but as a biological fact in women's development. She does not describe raging hormones as being miserable, and she offers Davita support when the moment arrives.

Channah provides a strong, positive female model for Davita to emulate, so that by the time she has created her primary identity, Davita is not a weak, submissive female character. Her father and her mother help create an androgynous sense of being in Davita, which later causes friction with the expectations for women from the Western world and Jewish world. Her childhood is unusual for girls in the 1930s because her parents never set limitations on what she can achieve. She later admires Rabbi Akiva who was "a scholar like my mother and a fighter like my father" (274). She respects both of her parents and fuses both of their personalities while creating her own. Although her development in her household is positive and gender-neutral, these same things do not exist in the Western culture and the Jewish tradition around her.

Batya Bauman, a Jewish woman, writes that "women are in *galut.* We are a community in exile" (89). Women, because of their gender, are often marginalized and considered the weaker sex. The assumption that woman are weaker lends itself to an array of behaviors that can oppress, abuse, and neglect women. The Western world has limited women to the roles of wives and mothers, the objects of men's affection (and abuse). Society has developed myths about a woman's menstruation that require her to be protected and the world to be protected from her, even assigning a mystical quality to menarche – when, according to research, women are no more vulnerable or likely to be miserable during menstruation than any other time (Donelson 189, 205). What Davita learns at home about being female directly conflicts with what she encounters in the Western world.

Davita's feminine experiences with Western culture are on the periphery. She is never fully engrossed in Western culture because her parents are Communist. She does

not attend a Christian church because her parents do not believe in religion. And she never experiences the world from a Western perspective because her parents believe that the culture is capitalist and wrong. Her experience with Western culture does not parallel her experience with Jewish tradition. Her encounters with the patriarchal aspects of Western culture are on the street corners of her neighborhood and the crowded hallway of the secular school she attends briefly; in these encounters she is seen as a vulnerable female by teenage boys, and she also experiences anti-Semitism.

While Davita lives in tenement apartments near a river, a teenage boy with a "leering look and glittering eyes and pimpled face" and his father live next door (7). The teenage boy approaches Davita, telling her that "Girls need protection on this block," and he offers to protect her for a penny a week (8). Because she does not understand what he means, she asks her mother to explain what the boy meant. When Davita explains why she wants to know, her father speaks to the teenage boy's father, but Davita has no other confrontations with this boy because they move within a week.

In her next encounter with a street gang, Davita is questioned about being Jewish. A schoolmate warns Davita about taking a shortcut that a gang of boys patrol, hinting at the anti-Semitism on that block; she takes the route anyway. When confronted about being Jewish, she is frightened by the older boys and she begins to cry and urinate on herself. Being female saves Davita from being further accosted by the boys, when one of them tells the leader: "Aw, come on, Vince. For Christ's sake, she's only a little girl" (13). However, we are left to wonder what would have happened if she had been a little Jewish boy. She never tells either of her parents about the experience because her newborn brother dies that same day. This is her first encounter in which her ethnicity and

gender is a source of shame. When she goes home, she quickly removes her soiled clothes and throws them away, as if to hide that she was unable to protect herself. She never discusses the event again. She does not have to deal with the gang again because, like before, she moves.

Davita does not encounter abuse from Westernized males again until much later in the novel. Returning to her secular school after spending the summer with her Aunt Sarah, Davita's first detailed experience at school involves a boy groping her breasts: "One morning a hall monitor put his hands on my chest and squeezed and said, 'Grapes,' and laughed hideously" (247). In this situation, Davita encounters the perceived sexual purpose of a female body – for a man's pleasure, not necessarily for her own enjoyment. Worse still, she is fondled by an authority figure in the school, a hall monitor, whose duty is to make sure that rules are obeyed. She experiences the physical limitations of being a female in Western society because she is seen as the weaker sex.

However, before Davita ever has to confront a Westernized concept of women, she is always removed from the situation: her family moves into another apartment or she attends another school. Davita does not confront the hall monitor again because she enters the yeshiva. Judaism is a safe haven for Davita because she considers it "better than sitting home listening to all the talk about Spain and Franco and Hitler and Stalin" (143). At the yeshiva, she can learn in peace because "no one whispered about you as you went through the corridors and no one put his hands on your chest and squeezed and yelled, 'Grapes!' and no one called you a Commie Jew shit to your face" (255). The yeshiva offers the hope that she will develop into a girl as she understands it from Channah – that femininity is found in intellectual pursuits. The physical aspect of being

female is not directly addressed at the yeshiva – she is not offered protection or groped – nor does Davita have to deal with anti-Semitism.

Davita turns to Judaism for solace when her parents' Communism is not enough to placate her imagination, when she must ease her pain when her father dies, and when she chooses to leave the secular school. She does not attend the synagogue with an awareness of the limitations placed on women. Women in the Jewish tradition, especially circa the 1930s, did not have the equality she sees in her parents' marriage. If "Jewish women are orphans of culture and history [and] they belong *nowhere*," then Davita, despite her desires to find identity and a place in Judaism will not find it (Glazer 129). Although women are respected in the Jewish tradition, and the Jewish boys she meets do not grope her or physically intimidate her, she is intellectually intimidated.

When she first meets David Dinn and his friends, they laugh at her for her lack of knowledge about Judaism because she does not know about the curtain that separates the men and woman nor about the bar mitzvah. Unlike her encounters with the gangs of boys, she is able to defend herself at first; Davita is capable of using words to defend herself. She asks David, "Is it the law that instead of helping you're supposed to laugh at someone who's trying to learn?" (124). The boys have no response. They later antagonize her for bringing a Christian King James Bible into the shul. Her experience is similar to how she feels when cornered by the street gang who asks whether she is Jewish; although the Jewish boys intellectually intimidate her and the street gang physically intimidates her, she is ashamed in both situations: "I felt myself swiftly judged and instantly impaled upon their cold and demeaning stares" (169). She has no response

for their taunts this time and is intimidated by what she does not know. She chooses to avoid the shul instead of going back.

The boys do not attempt to explain the meanings of words, traditions, and customs in the manner that Channah explains the world to Davita. However, the boys are not obligated to teach her either, and they, unlike Channah, are children. In Jewish tradition, women are given few spiritual roles, most having to do with the home. She is judged for not knowing Judaism the way that people raised into the culture know it but that does not stop her from wanting to learn. She is drawn to the music and chanting of Judaism and chooses to learn in spite of the initial awkwardness that accompanies her learning. But as she ages, she becomes aware of the limitations placed on her within Judaism. While watching David Dinn's bar mitzvah.[23] Davita laments that there is "nothing like that for me when I'd leave my childhood. All I had to look forward to was menstruating every month, bleeding and sanitary napkins and discomfort" (336).[24]

With no formal celebration to mark her transition into womanhood, Davita begins to understand the limitations for women in Orthodox Judaism. The very act of menstruating exiles Davita from the Jewish community; it signifies that she can be a mother, which limits her to household duties and keeps her from being active in Jewish rituals, and it marks her as ritually impure under Jewish law (Robinson 246). Channah may have been matter-of-fact about menstruation, but she does not expound on the significance of menstruation in Orthodox Jewish culture. Although Davita develops in such a way that menstruation does not cause significant emotional upheaval, the lack of a

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[23] A Jewish ritual that marks a Jewish boy as an adult. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.

[24] It is important to remember that when the narrative occurs, the female equivalent of the Bat Mitzvah did not have a special ceremony accompanying it. So while Davita may be acknowledged as being of age in the Jewish community at the age of 12, she does not celebrate this in the way that David does.

female maturation ritual does. When she is denied her valedictory award because she is female, she is distraught because her concept of femininity, of being a girl, focuses on intellectual success. Channah's attitude toward the world sets an example that suggests that femininity is defined by being a scholar, by amazing the crowds with intellect, not by producing children and caring for a home.

Yet Davita cannot turn away from Judaism, even though she knows that Judaism will never fully accept her as intellectually valuable. She finds "comfort in the kneeling and sense of my exhausted self yielding to the embrace of a presence I could not understand but felt all about me as I did the wind and the sea" (242). She finds Jewish spirituality soothing but cannot find her place in Jewish intellectualism. When she asks David Dinn whether a girl can become a rosh yeshiva, he tells her, "There are no girls in the high yeshivas" (310). Davita repeatedly is made aware that there is no place for her as a female in the open celebrations of maturation like the bar mitzvah, or in Jewish schools of higher learning. Yet, she insists on making a place for herself, attempting to mimic the gender equality that she has learned from her parents. Orthodox Judaism has yet to find a place for a woman that is outside of the home, however. Davita cannot recreate the gender equality she experiences at home, no matter how intelligent she is. Batya Bauman contends:

> Surely, if she had a choice, any self-respecting Jewish woman – let alone a feminist – would disavow herself from such a self-negating structure. But even after all that has been realized – and much, much more – is integrated into our consciousness, it is difficult for us to break our ties. We feel that we are a link in Jewish history, a history in which so many women as well

> as men have suffered and died just because they were Jews in order to remain Jews. (94)

Davita cannot leave Judaism because, after her personal experiences within the tradition and after her experiences with Noah Stremin and Leon Shertov, she becomes a link in Jewish history. She is a believable female character in that her development as a character in the novel and as a girl coincides with documented female development. *Davita's Harp*, in particular, is concerned with her quest for identity, a concern she continues to have in adulthood as seen in "The Seven of the Address," which demonstrates the never-ending nature of female identity formation. Channah instills in Davita a gender-neutral sense of identity that creates conflict with both the Western and the Jewish worlds but gives her a positive self-image. Her established primary identity conflicts with the patriarchal norms of society. But being a believable female character does not make Davita a believable feminist nor does it make *Davita's Harp* a feminist novel or any of the other short stories feminist. *Davita's Harp* does not develop as a feminist novel until the closing chapters when Davita has to recognize the limitations placed on her because of her gender and she can no longer ignore the separations between genders. Davita does not become a full-fledged feminist until later stories.

DAVITA AND FEMINISM

The term feminism is ambiguous; the definition varies from person to person, from country to country. The ambiguity is in part because there are so many different types of feminists. People can be "'familial feminists,' 'integral feminists,' 'Christian feminists,' 'socialist feminists,' 'radical feminists,' and 'male feminists' among others"

(Offen 128). It is difficult to discuss feminism without first separating the factual feminist from the fictional feminist. Various political parties and religions have mocked and trivialized feminism, seeing the women who lead the movement as disgruntled lesbians. And while these women are a part of feminism, they do not make up the entire movement. Feminism as an ideology will always be unstable because "the problems of the world are insidious and in flux" and often require people to reevaluate definitions of equality and justice (Roller 184). One branch of feminism may argue that patriarchal structures should be replaced with matriarchal structures; another branch of feminism may argue that replacing a patriarchy with a matriarchy continues oppression but under another set of genitals. Likewise, there are feminists who argue that feminism is solely a woman's concern, and others argue for the need to include people regardless of gender.

Karen Offen attempts to define feminism at its core, apart from the extraneous involvements given to it by people who choose to give it qualifiers such as "radical," "liberal," or "socialist." She posits that feminists can be female or male, as long as they meet three conditions:

> (1) they recognize the validity of women's own interpretations of their lived experience and needs and acknowledge the values women claim publicly as their own . . . (2) they exhibit consciousness of, discomfort at, or even anger over institutionalized injustice (or inequality) toward women as a group by men as a group in a given society; and (3) they advocate the elimination of that injustice by challenging . . . the coercive power, force or authority that upholds male prerogatives in that particular culture. (152)

I believe that Chaim Potok fits these criteria with his creation of Davita and her stories. He has recognized the importance of women's experience within Jewish culture and attempted to give it a voice in Davita. Although he was not aware of the growing discontent of women in Judaism prior to the 1970s, he has admitted that he was more conscious of it afterwards. He has taken an active role in advocating for women in Judaism and assisted the women in Jerusalem when the rabbi of the synagogue wanted to separate the balcony with a wall. He is a male feminist, as outlined by Offen, who creates a feminist narrative.

As I mentioned before, Davita and her stories are feminist in two ways. First, Davita is a feminist character. She is not a feminist in *Davita's Harp* like we would associate feminists with the women's movement, primarily because the terminology that accompanies the 1970s women's movement does not exist in Davita's 1930s New York. Her stance as a feminist writer is a result of her struggles with Judaism in *Davita's Harp* in which she desires to develop within that culture as a strong woman. It is not until her subsequent narratives that she demonstrates her leanings: she "busied herself with matters having to do with The [Jewish] Community. She typed letters to the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times* about feminist issues and the Arab uprising in Israel" (Potok, "The Seven of the Address" 77). If "feminism is a prophetic movement concerned with justice for the oppressed, compassion for those who suffer, a sense of history, or community, or righteousness, and the courage to live in opposition," then the stories that Davita writes are demonstrations of her feminism (Shulman 108). Her short stories are concerned with creating social equality, fighting oppression, and finding identity. When Benjamin

Walter begins reading her short stories in "The Trope Teacher," he is struck by the negativity:

> In the first story, "A Rainbow Costs 50 Cents Extra," an elderly man orders a birthday cake from a bakery for his dying wife, and is infuriated by an unexpected fifty-cent-extra charge for the decorative rainbow he has requested to be added to the icing as a symbol of love and peace. He recalls rainbows he and his wife have seen in skies churned by storms, returns to the bakery with a .22 revolver, and shoots the storekeeper dead. (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 174-175)

And in another story:

> "Fresh-Cut Color" was a monologue by a once famous lesbian film actress about to find out if her adopted daughter has been accepted into the first grade at a highly prestigious private school. The child is rejected. Memories flood the actress: her early rejections, her successes, her current fading career. The vengeance she wreaks upon the school . . . (175)

Davita tells Benjamin Walter that her stories are about a world where there is no ram, an allusion to the ram that sacrifices itself in place of Isaac and changes the course of Jewish history. None of Davita's characters that Benjamin reads have someone who intercedes on their behalf to ease their pain. The elderly gentleman is charged an extra fifty cents in spite of his heartwarming story; the actress' daughter is denied admission to a private school. Davita's stories are concerned with how the world works when there is no God to intervene and faith in man seems equally foolish. She embraces her outsider status, as Jew and feminist, by claiming the name "I.D. Chandal." There is no doubt that

the definition for chandala provided in *Davita's Harp* is significant: "chandala: an Indian of low caste: OUTCAST; UNTOUCHABLE; esp.: the son of a Sudra by a Brahman woman" (312). Davita has chosen to be identified – literally "I.D.'d" – as an outsider.

Yet she is not just a feminist but a Jewish feminist, a distinction that creates a separate definition. While all three of Offen's conditions for being a feminist apply to Davita, she also operates within the framework of Jewish tradition. Jewish feminists want to work within their religion; they want to know "how women achieve self-respect within religions and within a culture which has been male-defined" (Baker 204). Their movement began in 1972, with Ezrat Nashim (Helpers of Woman), which demanded equality for women. The organization wanted women to be included in areas of Judaism where they had not been allowed before: in the minyan,[25] in the rabbinate, in the Jewish courts, and in religious observances (Baker 70). In *Wanderings*, Chaim Potok argues for a new age for Judaism – an age that deals with the Holocaust and the rest of the changes of the twentieth century. Because the Holocaust devastated the Jewish people, American Jewry felt a responsibility to rebuild the culture. But with problems like assimilation and the tensions between the various sects, the rebuilding process for Jewry did not so much as rebuild itself as it began to unravel. If Judaism is to rebuild, women "may be one of the groups that saves American Jewry from itself" (Robinson 501).

The second way in which Potok develops feminism with Davita is that the Davita stories create a feminist narrative. Potok introduces the areas in which woman are disadvantaged in Judaism: the minyan, the Mehitzah, and the saying of the Kaddish. Davita is able to make her away around the curtain (she finds a tear), and she continues to say Kaddish, but she cannot avoid the confrontation between her feminism and Judaism

[25] The Jewish religious quorum. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.

that will have to come. Potok makes clear the injustice involving Davita and the Akiva Award. The response that a girl should not win because it would look bad for the yeshiva is not a sufficient answer. Even Reuven Malter,[26] her competition for the award, refuses it, saying, "I don't want anything I don't earn, Ilana . . . It wasn't mine, it was yours. What they did wasn't right. If that had happened to me . . ." (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 365). Reuven trails off at the end of his sentence because there is nothing to say. If he had been the original recipient of the Akiva Award, it would never have had to be given to someone else. If it had been given to someone else because of pressure from the Board of Directors, Reuven would have been able to fight the decision because he is male.

In all of the stories, Davita demonstrates the strength of her character in relation to others: in *Davita's Harp*, she uses her imagination to deal with death and loss; in "The Ark Builder," she teaches English to Noah as she teaches him how to cope with his horrific experience during the Holocaust; in "The War Doctor," she persuades Leon Shertov to share his story of KGB involvement; in "The Seven of the Address," she gets a better understanding of the author she will present in a lecture, as well as of herself; in "The Trope Teacher," she shows Benjamin Walter how to connect his present with his past. She is not a weak, submissive female character who cowers from challenges; she uses her intellect to recreate an imagined world where there exists birds, horses, deceased family, and all of the stories that people tell her. She uses her art to depict the worst aspects of humanity. Davita's greatest strength is in her potential to rebuild Jewry – a potential that Potok does not create in Asher Lev or Reuven Malter.

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[26] Yes. this is the same Reuven Malter from *The Chosen* and *The Promise*. Potok wrote his novels with the idea that his characters might intersect and build believability to his fictional world. The events of *Davita's Harp* occur before the narrative of *The Chosen* begins.

A WOMAN AMONG MEN: DAVITA, REUVEN MALTER, AND ASHER LEV

"I needed Davita for a number of reasons, some of them technical and some of them personal."—Chaim Potok[27]

DAVITA AND POTOK'S WORLD OF MEN

Davita is the only female main character in Potok's literature. The females who occupy the landscape of his continued narratives with Reuven Malter and Asher Lev are secondary and tertiary characters. Reuven's story in *The Chosen* is devoid of any active female involvement. The only women in the novel are Danny's mother, his sister, and his betrothed, but the allusions to these women are more part of Danny's story than Reuven's. None of these women are active participants in the book. Danny's mother enters the novel when Reuven meets her; the boys discuss his sister and her betrothal to a Hasidic Jew; and Danny's unnamed betrothed is discussed when he worries about the ramifications of leaving behind the position of tzaddik[28] to become a psychologist.

Potok's male-dominated landscape continues into *The Promise*, but female characters like Rachel Gordon and Ruth Gordon play a more significant role in the development of the narrative. Rachel Gordon's love of county fairs begins the friendship between her cousin, Michael Gordon, and Reuven; this is the friendship that causes Michael to open up to Reuven about the hatred he feels for his parents. Rachel also

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[27] As told to Elaine M. Kauvar in a 1986 interview (82).
[28] In Hasidic Judaism, the tzaddik is the name of the rabbi. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.

marries Danny Saunders. Ruth Gordon, Michael's mother, on the other hand, supports Abraham Gordon. She aids him in writing his works about Judaism; she keeps his research going and edits what he writes. She and Abraham agree together to allow Danny Saunders to perform his silence experiment on Michael in order to understand what is psychologically wrong with him.

The Asher Lev novels are as equally male-dominated as the Reuven Malter novels, although his mother, Rivkeh Lev, and his wife, Devorah, provide Asher with the support and influence that enables Lev to be a painter. In *My Name is Asher Lev*, Rivkeh is the only female character who has a substantial role in the novel. She buys Asher his first oil paints and supports his drawing when he is a little child. The crucifixion paintings that make him famous are based on his mother's sacrifices that allowed his father to travel for the Rebbe and help to rebuild European Jewry. Devorah's predominant role is in *The Gift of Asher Lev*. She provides the support Asher needs when he doubts himself even though she does not always understand his art. She attempts to bring together Asher and his family by encouraging him to stay in America after his uncle's funeral. With the exception of Davita, the women in Potok's works exist in supporting roles; the developed female characters, although important to the narratives, are not the focus of the novels.

When Potok published *Davita's Harp* in 1985, he had decided to approach the core-to-core cultural confrontation of Marxism and Judaism, as well as explore feminist themes. He explains: "I invented Davita because I needed a writer as one of the cast of characters that I'm developing" (Kauvar 82). His cast includes a Talmudist, a psychologist, a Bible scholar, a painter, and a mystic; and all of these people attempt to

reconcile his or her Judaism with the twentieth century (Kauvar 67). Davita is not only a response to the confrontations between Marxism and Judaism, and between feminism and Judaism, but she has an integral part in Potok's fictional world. He needed a writer because storytelling has a unique place in Jewish history:

> There is a long tradition in Jewish literature, indeed well since Hebrew Scripture, of bearing witness through the telling of stories . . . Storytelling served Jewish communities as a means of bearing witness to the events of the past and of defining the fluid specifics of Jewish identity. (Aarons 1)

The storyteller, unlike the other characters Potok has created, is the one who first attempts to bring order to chaos; the storyteller gives shape to myths and history, which in turn give shape to the human experience (Kauvar 85). The world needs the imagination of the storyteller to provide archetypes through which to deal with catastrophe.

It seems unusual that Potok would give a role of importance in Jewish tradition to a female character especially since male characters dominate his works. And in his continued narratives, Reuven Malter and Asher Lev are characters of prominence within their communities; Reuven becomes a professor at Hirsch University and Asher becomes a famous painter. Potok even admits that his male characters represent parts of himself "because I grew up very much involved with the mind, and in the worlds of art and literature [and] each of these characters, with the exception of Davita, is really, I suppose, a different aspect of myself" (Kauvar 77-8). Potok would have been more comfortable writing a narrative that had a male main character, rather than a female, but creating a female character was a topic that he would inevitably confront, given his experiences in

Jerusalem and with his wife and two daughters. Although creating Davita is an unusual departure for him, he chooses her character to be the writer. He commented that creating a female narrative was strange for him, but that

> it was an incredible experience to recognize a very powerful feminine element inside myself. There were times when it was scary, because I regard myself as very masculine . . . The male does not like to discover feminine sensibilities inside himself, and I discovered them. (Kauvar 83)

We must also remember that by this time in his fiction, Potok was becoming more aware of women's issues, and that the further he departed from Jewish ideas, the more he realized that he would eventually have to deal with his own thoughts about feminism and Judaism. Even though he knew he would eventually have to write a novel about the cultural confrontation between feminism and Judaism, he did not have to use *Davita's Harp* as a means for creating his writer. He could have created another narrative in which a male character became the storyteller for the world.

If Jewish identity survives on account of storytelling, the presumed weaknesses of women would be a hindrance in their ability to become the storyteller needed in a post-Holocaust era. Women are considered weaker from birth, despite medical statistics that suggest male children are more likely to suffer illness or die (Greene 80). But Davita is a strong character, even outliving her newborn brother, who, according to common thought, would have been more physically able than she, but obviously was not (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 13). Her parents raise her to be smart, regardless of what the world around her expects her to become; her mother wants her to understand the world in order to make it better. Her intellect is on par with his other characters, and the collision of

Marxism and Judaism is a subject Potok would be interested in, but he does not claim Davita's story as his own because it belongs to his wife:

> I have known Davita's story now for about twenty-five years, because Davita is my wife, and what happens to Davita at the end of the novel actually happened to my wife, except that it wasn't the Akiva Award that was taken away from her because she was a girl; it was the class valedictory. (Kauvar 82)

In spite of his declaration that Davita's experience is not his, Potok seems most excited about her as a character, planning a trilogy for her and wanting her to be the first character that he brings into the contemporary period.[29] He explains: "she is going to be brought right into the eighties on a journey that she makes to the Soviet Union. That's the point of the whole Communist background in the first of the Davita novels" (Kauvar 67). In "The War Doctor," we are aware that Davita is interested in Soviet developments because she is the one responsible for bringing Leon Shertov to the seminar on the Soviet Union, but Potok did not write a novel in which she visits the country. This unwritten novel also had Davita learn how to deal with reality not by using her imagination, "but to sink into it and reveal it with infinite detail" (Kauvar 70). He also expresses a desire to write a novel where Davita is in her seventies (Vanderwerken 171).[30] Because Potok had intended so many narratives for Davita, she stands apart from his other male characters. Potok further removes Davita from his male characters through his use of language.

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[29] Davita was not the first character that Potok brought into the contemporary period. The second Asher Lev novel, *The Gift of Asher Lev*, was published in 1990 and takes place in 1990. In fact, despite his apparent enthusiasm for the Davita character, he did not return to her until 1993, in the short story "The Seven of the Address." *Old Men at Midnight* is not the intended narrative for Davita that he spoke about either. Several of Potok's interviews indicate that he had more ideas for the Davita character than he could complete.

[30] Vanderwerken conducted this interview in 2000. Unfortunately, Potok was unable to publish a novel in which Davita is in her seventies because he died two years later.

The language of the Davita stories is distinct from those of Reuven and Asher; as she develops as a character, Potok begins to play with the fluidity of language, whereas his male-dominated fictions are linear and straightforward. When Potok returns to Davita in "The Seven of the Address," the verb tenses shift, her perceptions of reality and fantasy are skewed, and the narrative is distinctly non-linear – linear writing is a trait which is argued to be associated with masculine writing (Gardiner 355). As he creates Davita in this short story, and as he writes all of his works, he is "aware of how language could be made to carry a story: the texture and nuances of a phrase, a sentence; the intricate rhythms of a paragraph; the living style of a work that was as much a part of its presence as the story itself" (Potok, "The Map of Invisible Meaning" 23). But the language of the Davita narratives is unique: it emphasizes the imaginative quality of Davita's stories as she sorts through reality.

In fact, we are to understand that both "The Ark Builder" and "The War Doctor" are the written stories of Davita. "The Ark Builder" is written in the first person account of Davita. Her voice intercedes in Noah's story about a Holocaust atrocity in Poland; the language of his story is not in Noah's broken English, but in Davita's fluent speech. Outside of the context of his story, Noah's dialogue is written to represent a non-native speaker's English, but when he explains what happened to him in Poland, Davita recreates his narrative with flawless English. She does not want his story to get lost in translation. Yet, before he begins his story, Davita remarks, "Now I hear him again over the years, talking slowly about it, thinking what he and his brother had done" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 47). She is narrating her encounter with Noah, not as the 18 year old, but as an older woman, recalling the memories. In "The Trope Teacher," Benjamin

Walter describes the short stories written by Davita and mentions "The War Doctor": she writes a short story about "a former colonel of the KGB [who] recalls his years as an interrogator and torturer" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 175).

The Jewish world may need rabbis and teachers, as David Malter tells Reuven, but the world also wants answers. As Davita develops in *Davita's Harp*, her experiences of isolation within Judaism help create compassion and a soul. She becomes the storyteller because, although she has not experienced the Holocaust first-hand, she is the only character who learns to use her imagination to deal with conflict. Reuven is silent; Asher is silent. When these characters vocalize their disagreements with a situation, they are told to watch what they say, and instead they internalize the problem without confronting it until later. Even Asher, the artist, is not able to confront the suffering and sacrifice that he watches his mother endure until later in his life when he creates the crucifixion paintings. Davita confronts her problems with her imagination, but her imagination cannot change Orthodox Judaism.

Her love of the rituals does not allow her to leave the Jewish tradition. And although she is told the story of Aaron's sons who brought their own fire into the temple and Ezra warns that "we must preserve with care the sacred fire of our Torah, its laws, its words, and never permit it to be mixed with strange fires from the outside," she cannot help but blend her budding feminism with the Jewish traditions (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 164). Reuven cannot leave behind Orthodox faith for the world of Abraham Gordon; when contemplating not getting his *smicha* he calls it "an unhappy choice. I did not think I could be comfortable with Abraham Gordon's answers" (Potok, *The Promise* 270). Davita is more willing that Reuven or Asher to mingle the Torah fire with strange fires

from the outside. However, she only chooses to mingle those fires when Judaism denies her an active place.

DAVITA AND HER CONFRONTATIONS

Although Potok writes that the core-to-core cultural confrontation in *Davita's Harp* is between Marxism and Judaism, Davita's conflicts have a wider range (Potok, "The Invisible Map of Meaning" 35). Being female creates direct tension with patriarchal Judaism. Although growing up in a Marxist household provides Davita with a gender-neutral sense of self, it is her belief in gender equality that causes the tensions.[31] It is important to understand that Jewish texts present conflicting attitudes toward being female and being feminine:

> When it comes to women, the rabbis, all of them male until the last quarter of the twentieth century, set forth an essentially patriarchal system. But it is a patriarchy with a difference, because, as we shall see, they recommend for themselves the adoption of virtues they deem feminine. (Neusner 212)

In fact, the Song of Songs, when taken as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel, places Israel in the role of the woman. Israel is to love and devote herself to God in the same way a Jewish woman is to treat her husband. The aggadic[32] documents promote emotions that are classified as feminine: "humility, forbearance, accommodation, a spirit of conciliation, [which] exactly correspond to the political and

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[31] Note: when I write of Davita's awareness of gender equality or of a gender-neutral home, I do not mean to suggest that Davita is familiar with these terms. She does not make the distinctions between gender that would be made in homes where traditional gender roles play out – where the husband goes to work and the wife stays at home. What Davita sees in her parents is that gender does not affect how people treat them, and if anything, being female is more worthy of being revered since Channah garners more praise and attention for her intellect than does Michael.

[32] The commentaries that accompany topics such as folklore and medicinal practices. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.

social requirements of the Jews' condition in [the Biblical period]" (Neusner 221). The definition of feminine in the Jewish tradition includes submission, and Davita's definition of feminine, as learned from her mother, includes strength. In the halakha,[33] the documents of the rabbinical period, "women are perceived as abnormal in a world in which men define normal" (Neusner 222). In Orthodox Judaism, women's roles are determined by the halakha – which often leaves them disadvantaged. However, Davita develops in a household determined to have gender equality, where normal is defined by a joint effort, rather than by people of one gender.

Orthodox Jews may try to glorify a woman's position in Judaism by suggesting that "the role of women is different from yet complementary to men's role in society and in religious law" (Baker 35). Yet there are difficulties in justifying this position when women are denied the opportunity to take part in various rituals. While men devote time to the spiritual side of Judaism, women are required to maintain the household: "the religious activities open to women are performed in private, at home, cutting them off from the communal striving for holiness and severely limiting their participation in and identification with that realm of the sacred so central to Judaism" (Satlof 188). Women are given specific duties that are central to the home and they are excluded from many Jewish rituals because the rituals would remove the woman from her place in the home. Jewish women have been marginalized, left out of the minyan, separated from the men, and excluded from Kaddish; "the woman is essential and central [to the Jewish

[33] The Jewish Law. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.

household] but she is not critical" (Neusner 223).[34] A woman's place may be in the home, but the home can function without her.[35]

Through Davita, Potok intended to explore the emerging feminist consciousness in Judaism while coming to terms with it himself. Published in 1985, *Davita's Harp* gives a voice to feminists' concerns in Judaism, especially in relation to rituals that are denied to women. Davita tries not to acknowledge that Judaism has a specific place for people based on gender – men have a more prominent role in Jewish spirituality than women – but her experiences with various Jewish rituals, the Mehitzah, the Kaddish, and the Akiva Award, force her to confront what she believes about gender and what Judaism teaches.

Davita's first encounter with gender inequality in Orthodox Judaism is with the Mehitzah. Because Davita is unfamiliar with the patriarchal structures in Judaism, she neither understands the need for a divisions between the sexes, nor does she understand the limitations she, as a female, will encounter in the Jewish faith. When she sees the curtain, which blocks her view from the action of the service, she finds a tear in the curtain: "I sat in a chair directly against the curtain and searched for a loosened seam that might afford me a clear view of the men's side of the room. I had to change seats three times before I found one" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 122). Davita illustrates her persistence to avoid being left out of the service; she is so determined to know what happens on the men's side of the synagogue that she moves to find a view. She continues to sit in that

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[34] The Orthodox Jews are the only sect of Judaism that are still adamant about separating women: "[T]he Reform and Progressive communities . . . have women rabbis; women may be called up to the reading of the *Torah* in synagogue; women sit with men in synagogue (not segregated from them as in Orthodox synagogues)" (Baker 40).

[35] We see this in Potok's works as well. In *The Chosen* and *The Promise*, David and Reuven Malter get along fine without a woman in the home. So, too, do Ezra and David Dinn in the beginning of *Davita's Harp*.

same place even after her curiosity about the service fades. It is no wonder that she continually peeks in on the men's side: "everything important happens in the men's section: the sacred Scrolls of the Law are kept in the men's section; the reading table is in the men's section" (Robinson 499). As Davita grows older and comes closer to her final confrontation with gender inequality in Judaism, she attends a synagogue in which she finds no tears in the curtain:

> The women's section in that little synagogue was even more confining than the one in the yeshiva's synagogue. A heavy muslin curtain had been drawn across the last few rows from wall to wall, forming a space that resembled a cage. We could hear the service and see nothing. I found no holes or tears in that curtain. (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 315)

She compares the separation in this synagogue to a cage, a symbol frequently associated with women and the boundaries placed on them by patriarchal societies. Orthodox Jewish women are caged into roles in the household and denied participation in the spiritual rituals. They are further caged because they are female and required to perform niddah[36] – purification rituals – for their homes as well as for themselves. They are separated by a physical curtain in the synagogue and by the law that requires them to avoid contact with people when they menstruate. Women are excluded from being counted in the minyan, from reading the blessings over the Torah, or from having leadership roles in the synagogue (Baker 48). Davita's upbringing has taught her that she can be in a leadership role; after all, Channah leads small group studies on Karl Marx and is respected for her intelligence. Davita is not a character to be caged in; when the novel opens, she remarks: "very early I became a wanderer . . . I needed the streets as antidote

[36] See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.

to the pernicious confines of the apartments in which we lived" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 6). She is not content to be told what to do but wants to make her own decisions.

When Michael, Davita's father, dies, her grief is not assuaged by the simple ceremony held to honor him. She feels a need for something more, but when she asks her mother if there will be another memorial service, Channah responds by questioning Davita: "What else do you want, Ilana?" (193). She is not sure what else she wants, but when she enters into the Jewish tradition, she finds solace in saying the Kaddish (the prayer for the dead). Maurice Lamm describes the Kaddish as

> one of the most beautiful, deeply-significant and spiritually moving prayers in the Jewish liturgy. It is an ancient Aramaic prose-poem, a litany whose word-music, strong rhythms, stirring sounds, and alternating response of leader and congregation, cast sheer hypnotic power over the listeners . . . It is a call to God from the depths of catastrophe, exalting His name and praising Him, despite the realization that He has just wrenched a human being from life. (150)

Although Lamm claims that the Kaddish has such a healing affect on people, women are not required to say it. Often, because women are not required to say the prayer, people misconstrue that to mean that women should not say the prayer. Kaddish requires an eleven-month period of mourning with the prayer said every day. Women are not obliged to recite the prayer because women are usually busy taking care of their households, and since a woman's place is in the home, saying the Kaddish would pull her from her sacred duties there (Neusner 231).

Under Jewish law, the son has the primary responsibility for saying the Kaddish (Lamm 164). If the father is survived by a daughter, she is expected to find a male relative to say the prayer for her (Lamm 166). By saying the Kaddish prayer, Davita's actions conflict with Jewish customs that outline that the prayer should be spoken by men. Again, Davita does not – arguably even chooses not to – understand the gender divide in Judaism. The first time she recites the Kaddish, she does so unexpectedly, not realizing that she knows the words. Davita recalls that

> There was a surge of whispering, a soft surflike rush of sound from the women around me. Someone said, "What is she doing?" Another said something in Yiddish. I stood, quietly reciting the words. There has to be more for you Papa, than just one memorial service. Can one recite the Kaddish for a father who wasn't a Jew? I didn't care. I went on. (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 200)

When she says Kaddish again in the service, the women do not respond as they had the first time; she hears "one or two of the women answer, 'Amen'" (200). David Dinn tries to explain that she does not have to say the prayer, but Davita does not listen to him in one scene, and in another scene she tells him she has to do more for her father's memory (200, 209). When David tries to explain yet again, Davita brushes him off by asking if he heard the amount of women who responded to her during the prayer (224). She is elated that women follow her lead although perhaps she does not understand the significance of her standing to say Kaddish and the women responding. She is happy that the women support her in saying Kaddish, whereas before, the women were silent and questioned her actions.

She refuses to acknowledge the Jewish custom that excludes women from saying the prayer and continues even when her teacher instructs her to stop. On her first day of class in the yeshiva, Davita recites the Kaddish along with a fellow student. After class, her teacher pulls her aside because he knows that she recites Kaddish in the shul, but he does not want her saying it in his classroom. Davita does not respond to his restriction about not saying the prayer in his classroom, and the next day, she stands to recite the prayer again:

> I felt the teacher's burning eyes upon me, felt all their eyes, staring. But he said nothing to me about it again, and after a few days there were no more stares. All uttered the necessary responses at the appropriate places. Then one day the boy who recited Kaddish with me did not rise, and I stood saying the words – "Magnified and sanctified be the great name of God . . ." – and still all responded. (254)

She refuses to let anyone stop her from saying the prayer because, like Maurice Lamm suggests, the Kaddish is a prayer that helps with the grieving process. Although women are not responsible for saying it, the effects are not lost on women. Sara Reguer, a Jewish feminist, recounts a situation much like Davita's; while attempting to say the Kaddish for her dead mother, the head of the hevrah kadishah (the people in charge of burials) asked that men only recite the prayer. And like Davita, she insisted, despite being told to do otherwise, and the prayer helped her grieve (178). With the Mehitzah and the Kaddish, Davita is able to work around the divisions made between males and females in the Orthodox synagogue. She finds a tear in the curtain; she persists on praying.

Nevertheless, Davita's final encounter with gender inequality is not a situation she can avoid; when she is denied the Akiva Award, nothing helps her attain it.

The refusal to give Davita the Akiva Award is the ultimate confrontation with feminism and Judaism in *Davita's Harp*. Unable to avoid the gender divisions of her chosen faith, Davita is forced to confront her beliefs that the best should succeed, regardless of gender, and confront the betrayal she feels at the hands of the yeshiva's Board of Directors. She describes the award as "the ultimate recognition of achievement given by the school, a mark of permanent membership in the annals of the yeshiva community" (300). For Davita, a girl who has based her ideas of femininity on intelligence and scholarship, the Akiva Award is important. Unfortunately, no girls had ever won the award at her yeshiva, but this fact does not stop her from trying. Davita pours herself into her school work, often staying up later than her equally-studious step-brother, David. She is determined to earn the award, and she even asks for tutoring in algebra from her rival for the award, Reuven Malter.

Her dedication to her studies gets her the highest marks for her grade level, but not the Akiva Award. Mr. Helfman, her teacher, explains that if a girl won the award, then the yeshiva would look bad to neighboring schools, and the Board of Directors had decided to give the award to the male student with the highest grades, Reuven Malter (358). Davita is devastated. She explains the situation to her parents, who try to find out why she is denied the award, but they learn that it is not just the Board of Directors who chose to deny her the award, but also more powerful people. Ezra Dinn, her step father, tells her that the decision is not meant to be cruel, but it is made by "authorities in high academies of learning who had let it be known through intermediaries that they would

look with disapproval upon a yeshiva where a girl was publicly shown to be the best student of a graduating class that had boys in it" (363). Davita does not receive the award because of the negative effects it would have on the rest of the boys who graduated from her yeshiva – in this graduating class and in others. No one wants to know how Davita feels because in the Jewish world, she is not allowed to enter into higher yeshivas, so losing the award will not cost her anything. The boys, on the other hand, who are allowed to attend higher yeshivas, could have their careers ruined.

Davita cannot use her usual tactics to avoid confrontation; she cannot change the subject as she does when David tries to explain the Kaddish nor can she decide to persist in order to win the award. Her fate has been chosen by people she does not know, and she is unsure how to respond. She feels betrayed by the faith that she has chosen:

> [The award] had been stolen from me for a reason I could not control: I was a girl. What else would they steal from me in the coming years? I would accomplish something, and they would tell me I couldn't have it because I was a girl. I had made this community my home, and now I felt betrayed by it . . . How could I be part of such a community? I felt suddenly alone. And for the first time I began to understand how a single event could change a person's life. (365)

When Davita initially turns to Judaism, she does so because she likes the songs and the comfort she feels from being around all of the people. However, as she finds herself deeper entrenched in Orthodox Judaism, she realizes that her self-concept and Judaism's definitions of womanhood are irreconcilable. She cannot be feminine in the way that she learned from her mother -- the woman who leads small group studies and awes the crowd

– and be feminine in the way that Judaism demands. Her inability to reconcile her beliefs and those of patriarchal Judaism makes her experience like other girls' experiences in women's fiction (Pratt 29). Even though she is denied the award and she has to reconstruct her understandings of her self, she learns compassion.

Because she knows that her life will never be the same after her graduation, Davita begins to understand the effects that one event can have on the lives of people. She understands how, when there is no ram as a sacrifice, the world changes. The failure to receive the Akiva Award is in no way equal to the sufferings of the Holocaust, but not receiving the award is one step towards her understanding of social injustice and the evils of the world. Her compassion will make her a better writer. Her understanding of gender inequality will make her a feminist.

DAVITA AND HER PURPOSE

In *The Chosen*, David Malter tells Reuven, "A man must fill his life with meaning, meaning is not automatically given to life. It is hard work to fill one's life with meaning" (Potok 217). When Davita does not receive the Akiva Award that she has earned, she wants nothing more than to make sense of the event; she wants to bring order to the chaos. She wants to give meaning to her life because what she understands about being a woman and what Judaism demands are incompatible. She wonders, "How do you fight faceless phantoms? What would the westering [sic] women do now? What would Uncle Jakob do? They would use their imaginations" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 365-366). Davita's ability to utilize her imagination to deal with reality defines her purpose as a character in Potok's fictional world.

As she does in previous confrontations that she cannot control, Davita turns inward to make sense of her surroundings. In novels of female development, characters "often experience surreal images and symbols, disassociated fantasies, and chaotic noises that mimic clinical madness" when they undergo their rebirths (Pratt 142). When Davita attempts to resolve her feelings of betrayal, she creates an imagined scene in which she addresses herself in the third person, and she shrinks and the wind carries her into the harp. In her fantasy, Jakob's little black bird and the Picasso's little bird from *Guernica* carry the door harp into the painting of the beach on her wall, where she sees her father Michael, Jakob Daw, and Aunt Sarah. The scene brings together all of the positive images that have been a part of her imagination since the beginning of the novel (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 366-367).

With her imagined father, Jakob Daw, and Aunt Sarah around her, she gives the graduation speech she would have given if she had received the award. She expresses a desire to speak not just to friends and family, but to the world. Davita conveys her uncertainty:

> I wanted to say that I'm very afraid to be living in this world and I don't understand most of the things I see and hear and I don't know what will happen to me and to the family I love. I wanted to say that I would try to find and join the side of America that wouldn't hurt people like Wesley Everest,[37] and I would also try not to let this century defeat me. (368)

[37] Davita reads about him in John Dos Passos' novel *1919*. She reads that he was a logger in Washington and was murdered for having beliefs that people did not agree with. While Everest is in jail, a mob broke in and took Everest to a bridge, where they cut off his penis and testicles and hung him from the bridge. Michael Chandal supposedly witnessed this event.

Davita wants to make sense of the world. She wants to find a place where she belongs, and her desire for community is especially significant since female identity formation is a series of attachments and rejections. Rejected by the yeshiva's Board of Directors, Davita turns to her imagination and to those she loves to find acceptance; using imagination to come to terms with reality is a constant theme in Davita's life (Kauvar 69). She uses her imagination to heal herself as well as heal others.

If Davita is the catalyst for the healing of other characters, she can be a character at the forefront of the story – as she is in *Davita's Harp*, "The Seven of the Address," and "The Ark Builder" – or she can be a character who acts in the background, bringing the stories of others to life – as she does in "The War Doctor" and "The Trope Teacher." Davita is able to take part in the ritual act of naming – a ritual with extreme importance in Judaism:

> it includes the acts of creating images and symbols, interpreting perceived reality, telling personal and communal stories and rituals. In other words, one who controls names controls language. And if history is the product of its recordings, and tradition the accumulation of its tellings, language controls reality, for it is the means by which we conceive and perceive the world. (Satlof 190-191)

Channah tells Davita something similar as a young child. She tells her it is important to know the proper names for things because without that knowledge, no one can change the world. Davita needs to understand the past in order to change the future (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 10). In fact, in Jewish tradition, if a name is not spoken or remembered, it will be erased from history. In several of Potok's novels, when a character mentions Hitler, the

character follows the utterance with the phrase, "May his name be erased from history" or the equivalent. Potok's Jewish characters also refuse to say aloud the name "Jesus Christ" for the same reason. Both names conjure images of the mass bloodshed of the Jewish people at the hands of the Western world. Davita becomes obsessed with people's stories because, to her, there is no future without them; "stories, however ephemeral and insubstantial, can stay the executioner's hand, or offer a humane countervision in a world gone mad" (Roskies, "The Stories the Thing" 119). Davita collects other people's stories in order to make sense of the world so that she and the rest of the world can understand it. She wants to be like her door harp that she imagines singing "for all the Ilana Davitas who never had a chance to speak their few words to this century" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 369).

POTOK'S HARP: DAVITA AS THE STORYTELLER

"Sing! Take your light, hollow harp in hand,/ Strike hard with heavy fingers, like pain-filled hearts/ On its thin chords. Sing the last song./ Sing of the last Jews on Europe's soil." – Yitzhak Katzenelson"[38]

STORYTELLING AND IDENTITY

Storytelling has a unique place in human history; Potok suggests that "we Homo sapiens love a story because it is the initial way that we give configuration to the chaos that surrounds us and terrifies us" (Kauvar 85). Stories are factual or fictional; they educate; they entertain; they do both. Stories provide for our beginnings and offer us a sense of identity within a community. Storytelling is the primary way that adults communicate to children, and which teaches children a sense of time and place, as well as how to narrate their own autobiographies (Greene 109). Storytelling has a significant place for Davita. In *Davita's Harp*, Channah tells Davita about Russia, Poland, and Baba Yaga; Jakob Daw tells Davita about a little bird and horses; and her Aunt Sarah tells her Christian stories and about the American pioneer women. Davita takes each of these stories and develops her own narrative with them, although she does not seem as interested in her mother's stories about Russia and Poland as she is in the magical worlds created by Jakob and Sarah.

The imagination aids people in creating order; for American Jews writing about the Holocaust, imagination enables them to approach creating Holocaust characters. Although they have not experienced the death camps or the war directly, they create

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[38] "The Song of the Murdered Jewish People" pg. 531 from *Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*. Ed. David G. Roskies. New York: The Jewish Publication Society. 1989. 531-547

characters who have. These characters help their authors work through the guilt of surviving and devastation. However, the Holocaust is not an easy subject to approach. In an interview, Potok tells S. Lillian Kremer that he avoided the Holocaust as a direct subject:

> I don't know whether or not I can write a Holocaust novel. I don't know whether I can get the distance needed to handle it aesthetically. It seems to me to be so a-aesthetic an experience that I don't quite know what thread of it to grab hold of so that I could weave it into some sort of aesthetics. I'm not altogether certain whether I want it to be a separate novel. (39)

There are Holocaust survivors scattered throughout his fiction (Rav Kalman in *The Promise*, Devorah Lev in *The Gift of Asher Lev*), but Davita is the only character who has a narrative which specifically confronts another character's encounter with the Holocaust; "The Ark Builder" centers on Davita's interactions with Noah. Rav Kalman and Devorah Lev hint at their experiences, but they are not the subjects of the novels; the purpose of "The Ark Builder" in *Old Men at Midnight* is to relate the experience of a Holocaust survivor. Potok believes that "sundered by the truths about ourselves and our world that yield more trauma than comfort, we often look upon story-making as the beginning of healing" ("Invisible Map of Meaning" 44). We are to understand that as Noah leaves for yeshiva, he has been able to begin healing because he has begun to confront his experience with the Holocaust.

Stories also help people "gain a greater range and understanding of emotional, cognitive, and social concepts" (Hoogland 80). Storytelling helps reinforce accepted

traditions and mores, while couching cultural education in a creative medium. In the Jewish tradition, storytelling is important because it informs the listener of the past. The Jewish storytelling tradition includes the stories that Davita learns about the Rabbi Akiva, as well as the Biblical stories. However, the label of Jewish writer becomes a vague term that includes the observant and non-observant; Jewishness is an ethnicity as well as a religion. Because of this shift, the subjects of Jewish literary tradition change.

Victoria Aarons suggests that American first-born children of immigrants, having moved away from the traditions of their families, return to tradition because "the problem for the American-born child of immigrants . . . is that of history, or, more to the point, the absence of a sense of history and communal belonging beyond personal past" (6). However, the Jews who leave behind fundamentalism, do not have to leave Judaism; they still have "a community and a history that [they] can relate to" (Kremer, "Interview with Chaim Potok" 34). Aaron's suggestion may be why Jewish feminists, although they do not agree with ultra-Orthodox beliefs, do not turn away from Judaism as a whole. Even Davita, who we know does not remain Orthodox, is still observing the Shabbat by the time of "The Seven of the Address." Aarons' insinuation that the absence of story is a problem in the development of immigrants' children parallels Joseph Campbell's suggestion that contemporary society needs stories and myths because they teach people how to live. He outlines this as the fourth function of myth: "this is the one that I think everyone today must try to relate to – and that is the pedagogical function, of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances. Myths can teach you that" (39).

Like other Jewish characters who search for a communal sense of identity in stories, Davita also remembers the stories more than her personal history. At the close of *Davita's Harp*, she remarks:

> What connected me to my past? Memories? Save for certain sharp images, they seemed to be fading. Stories? Yes, stories. I still remember the stories. Even though I didn't understand them. I remembered. A bird and music and a gray horse. And the girl on the slope along the river who sold her ground-up flowers in the nearby village. And, yes, even Baba Yaga. (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 334)

The images of the stories she has been told remain with her more than her own memories. When Davita has to cope with being denied the Akiva Award, she turns to the images from the stories that she does not understand, rather than to her mother's stories about Russia and Poland. She is interested in the power of the metaphor and the image, instead of the fact. The connection she feels to her past is strengthened by her stories but it also helps her connect to her future. Stories provide a sense of identity:

> Without a history or without a story, there is little that we can say about ourselves. The generalization of our humanity leave us only with superfluous bodies. We can say what we feel but not what we are beyond those bodily feelings. The desire to remove all mythological masks and escape the relativities of historical identity leave us faceless [sic]. (Winquist 102)

Without an understanding of the stories that make people into communities, people lose the connection to their collective histories. The loss of identity felt without stories is why

Aarons suggests that the American immigrants' children who have rejected the traditions of their parents struggle with the absence of history; and why Campbell suggests that people need myths to teach themselves to live. Stories, in particular, have a strong resonance in the twentieth-century: "we are the children of the reformation and the enlightenment. We have experienced the failure of spiritual mediation and have developed the tools for stripping experience of its mythological and ideological clothing" (Winquist 101). When people distance themselves from tradition and the source of identity, they find a need for it later.

Secularism provides answers to questions about God and existence by eliminating a creator from the questions. Without a god in the Covenant between God and the Jewish people, Jews can understand the Holocaust, not as punishment for sin, but as an extension of anti-Semitism. They are not required to continue loving and worshipping a God who would let them suffer. Richard Rubenstein notes that

> the world of the death of god is a world devoid of hope and illusion .... It is relatively simple to celebrate apocalyptic liberation in one's youth, but what of later years? The death of God does not cancel death. It heightens our sad knowledge that no power, human or divine, can ultimately withstand the dissolving onslaughts of omnipotent Nothingness. (259)

Rubenstein hits on the very thing that is the impetus for Davita's love of story and her role as a writer. She does not exist in a world where God is dead. She may not believe in Orthodox Judaism, but she does not abandon her faith. She believes that there is a purpose in life and that "there is always a ram in the bush" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 172). Her task is to show the rest of the world its own rams.

DAVITA AND STORYTELLING

Davita repeatedly turns to storytelling; when she is younger, she is fascinated by magical stories and fairy tales: "Rumpelstiltskin. Sleeping Beauty. Hansel and Gretel. I found I could not stop reading" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 223). Jakob Daw's unusual stories intrigue her: "I could not grasp the story; yet I kept dreaming of the bird. How strange to be so affected by a story that I did not understand" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 43). As she ages, she becomes intrigued by people's personal stories. She pleads with Leon Shertov, the ex-KGB colonel, to tell his stories to her. She tells Benjamin Walter that "'if the pen cannot unravel [memory] the voice can'" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 170). Davita wants stories told to her because in the telling, a collective memory emerges. Because she is not content with her mother's Communist teachings, her Aunt Sarah and Jakob Daw fascinate her childish imagination. She remarks that although Jakob Daw does not look physically strong, she "felt a strength in him, a quality of being I did not understand, a strong and nearly overpowering sense of his presence as he sat there next to me" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 204). Just as she associates femininity with intelligence – which she learns from her mother – she comes to associate storytelling and imagination with strength.

Throughout the novel, Davita begins to develop a safety net in stories, storing her imagined memories in the door harp that hangs above her bedroom door. In fact, stories enable people to think through problems; people can "become aware of the interplay between the stories of their lives and those, for example, of fairy-tale characters, and can gain skill in transforming both real and fictional experiences into original narratives"

(Hoogland 79). Taking the stories of Jakob Daw, she creates her own interpretation of them to make a place for herself in the world. When she is sick and her Aunt Sarah takes care of her, she has chaotic dreams about the horses from the paintings in her room, the beach, and the little bird. The images help soothe Davita's grief and suffering, and when her fever ends, her aunt continues to tell her stories that are based on the Christian faith:

> She loved telling me stories about healers and the power of faith and prayer. She told me of people given up for dead who were returned to health through prayer – through psalms and other passages from the Bible and prayers written by officials of the Church. (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 243)

This is the first experience in which Davita draws inward to heal herself, and she does so by using her imagination. She has to reconcile reality with what she desires spiritually, an act recreated in most Jewish feminist fiction. The narratives "do not reject the physical world [but strive to] reconcile it with the spiritual in a manner that will result in the transformation and revaluation of the customary realm of women" (Satlof 199). As Potok has argued, only by considering faith and the realities of the twentieth century will Judaism be able to emerge from the destruction of the Holocaust. Claire Satlof contends that "writing itself, for feminists, is a form of rebellion, usurpation, or re-visioning; it also marks the beginning of a new ritualization and a new myth-making" (193). Jewish feminists may be one of the groups that aids Judaism in rebuilding, one group that is able to deal with the "sense of renewal, a forced sharpening of our self-identity, a feeling that we are approaching some distant fertile plain, though we cannot clearly make out the paths leading to it" (Potok, *Wanderings* 524). Just as Jewish feminist writers are

concerned with finding a place for themselves, a place that combines their faith with the changing world, Davita is also preoccupied by doing the same thing.

Davita uncovers the full strength of her imagination and metaphors of story when she creates an acceptance speech for the Akiva Award that she should have won. Having been denied the award because of her gender, Davita deals with the situation through the power of her imagination, in the same way that she dealt with the death of her father and the loss of Jakob Daw. Whereas her imagination creates a disjointed dream sequence after she almost drowns in the lake, her fantasy is better developed when she returns to her imagination to cope with not receiving the award. She does not envision a series of disorganized images but rather combines all of the images into a cohesive narrative.

She resurrects her dead father and the dead Jakob Daw to hear her acceptance speech. An imagined Aunt Sarah tells her to "be discontented with the world. But be respectful at the same time" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 370). The characters in her fantasy provide the support she needs while coping with the betrayal she feels at the hands of the Board of Directors. Neither her mother nor her step-father attempts to discuss the situation with Davita, beyond explaining that higher yeshivas look down on the possibility that a girl would have the highest marks in a graduating class, and that pressure has forced the yeshiva to give the award to a male student. Channah does not provide a dictionary definition to clarify Davita's anger and hurt, nor does she attempt to explain how Judaism limits the roles of women. Channah – who continues to read the leftist magazine *New Masses* after marrying Ezra – wants her daughter to be intelligent and strong but she offers no explanations or definitions when Davita does not receive the

Akiva Award. Channah does not take Davita aside to discuss the limitations placed on women in the Orthodox Jewish culture.

Most of *Davita's Harp* focuses on how the heroine is able to use her imagination for herself, but at the end of the novel, Davita tells a story to her newborn sister, Rachel:

> I want to tell you a story. It's a strange story. It doesn't have an ending. But you might find it interesting anyway. It's a story about two birds and some horses on a beach far away. Are you listening, little Rachel? And it's about a door harp . . . (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 371)

Mimicking the storytelling style of Jakob Daw, Davita begins her first attempt at telling her stories to the world. And the first story that she voices to the world is her own; she includes all of the images from her previously imagined graduation speech – the little birds, the horses, and the door harp. Rather than tell Rachel a factual account of her life, Davita couches her story in metaphor. The novel closes before she finishes the story, but we already know how it progresses; Davita struggles to find her place in the patriarchal structures of Orthodox Judaism. She begins telling her story to Rachel because her sister will also have to endure the limitations placed on her within Jewish tradition.

Davita develops an obsession with storytelling that continues into "The Seven of the Address" and the novellas of *Old Men at Midnight*. In the short story, Davita reveals that the themes of her stories are specific but also universal: "her subject was the modern intellectual poised amid the relativities of secularism yet sensing from time to time the obtrusive beckonings of the world of tradition" (Potok 77). The theme she explores is that of her own experience, her own desires to be an intellectual, but also her inability to

leave behind the Jewish tradition. Her subject is not unique to her writings; it is, in fact, a common theme in Jewish American writing:

> All the many forces brought to bear on Judaism in the twentieth century – dispersion, genocide, Zionism, immigration, Marxism, liberalism, assimilation, psychoanalysis, feminism – have heightened an already existing sense of fragmentation and marginality that informs American Jewish literature. Thus to hear the stories of the past becomes a major preoccupation, especially for those American-born characters who have been denied a sense of communal Jewish identity. (Aarons 14)

Davita's writings parallel the common theme in Jewish American literature and, not surprisingly, the common theme in Potok's own novels: that of cultural confrontations.[39] Her writings are all the more powerful in Potok's fictional world because she garners extensive scholarly success. When Benjamin Walter researches Davita's[40] writings, he finds "half a shelf of critical works on I.D. Chandal . . . a volume in the Twayne's United States Author Series; a number of UMI-printed dissertations; and a Modern Critical Views volume" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 188-189).

Davita has made something of herself that the yeshiva Board of Directors cannot take away because of her gender, and she has realized her desires to be feminine as defined by her mother – she awes the crowds. But her critical success also makes her different from characters like Reuven Malter and Asher Lev. Reuven, as far as Potok

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[39] Potok tells S. Lillian Kremer that the problem he has is: "how to fuse core elements of both worlds and how far you can go with fusion before you lose the essential nature of one's identity . . . The ability to maneuver between the two cultures is so enormous and so potentially enriching that there is a lot to talk about before you draw lines" (34). This fusion is a part of his own life as well as a main theme for his characters.

[40] Note: When Davita becomes the feminist writer, she does not refer to herself as Davita, but as I.D. Chandal. For the sake of unity, I will continue to refer to her as Davita.

created him, remains within his Jewish community. Asher, while receiving critical acclaim in the art world, does not focus his art of the sufferings of the world around him; he leaves his family in America to pursue art. It is only Davita who attempts to build relationships with Jews on the periphery. Through her own imagination and by helping release the powers of the imaginations of others, she acts as a healer to the various Jewish people she encounters.

When Davita chooses to become a storyteller, she enters into a tradition among American Jewish writers in which "the necessity to tell is rivaled only by the urgency to hear, to know the stories of the past" (Aarons 12-13). In fact, many American Jewish writers create characters, as Potok has done with Davita, for whom the "very act of telling stories, of narrating events, becomes a strategy in the attempted formation of cultural identity" (Aarons 23-24). Because the spoken word carries such significance in Jewish culture, having the stories told suggests that they will not be forgotten. She tells Benjamin that her stories are about what the world is like where there are no rams, no sacrifices to intercede, yet her involvement with the three men of *Old Men at Midnight* suggests that there is a "ram in the bush" somewhere (Potok 172). Noah Stremin finally reveals his Holocaust experiences in Poland to Davita. Leon Shertov's life, in which he had to deny his Judaism in order to survive in Soviet Russia, will not be forgotten. Benjamin Walter finally sees "as he had never seen before the exposed roots and tangles of the long-buried connections, and was overcome with an infinite sorrow" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 273). For the Jewish people, there will always be a ram in the bush; they only need to find it for themselves.

DAVITA AND HER STORIES

Jakob Daw tells Davita that "'a writer is a strange instrument of our species, a harp of sorts, fine-tuned to the dark contradictions of life'" (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 77). Stories draw in Davita, giving her a sense of place; and as she ages, stories become an outlet for her to explore the people and characters who lose their connections to the past and to each other. Noah Stremin is the only survivor from his town; Leon Shertov escaped Soviet Russia; and Benjamin Walter cannot recollect his early adult life before marrying his wife. Davita finds solace in stories because unlike Judaism, stories "do not limit or exclude others by race, socio-economic status, or even various family dynamics" (Hoogland 84). Storytelling appeals to her feminist sensibilities. Although she is exiled as Other because she is female and a Jew, stories provide a world where she can exist.

The novellas in Potok's *Old Men at Midnight* are Davita's stories. As suggested by the synopsis of *Old Men at Midnight* printed on the back cover, Davita is the listener for the three men, each of whom endures some crisis of faith, either in Judaism or in humanity. She relates Noah Stremin's story of the horrors of the Holocaust. She coaxes Leon Shertov/Kalman Sharfstein's tales of KGB involvement that ultimately deal with the Jewish faith. She helps Benjamin Walter see the connections between his life and the lives of others. Although Davita seems to take a less active role in the individual novellas, when the three novellas combine into the whole novel, the development of the three segments centers on her and her ability to bring healing through her stories – something Jakob Daw had hoped to bring.

In "The Ark Builder," the opening novella in *Old Men at Midnight*, Davita introduces Noah Stremin, a sixteen year-old recent immigrant to America who spent

three years in a slave labor camp during World War II and two years in a displaced persons' camp after the end of the war (7). Because his English is poor, his aunt and uncle request a tutor on the bulletin board in Davita's synagogue. She responds to the ad, and she begins tutoring Noah in English. Not far into the tutoring sessions does she learn that Noah does not merely need to learn English, but also how to cope with the Holocaust.

When Noah and Davita are in her room for the second tutoring session, he begins to reveal the effects that the Holocaust have had on him:

> Noah said quietly, "You have pictures. I have nothing."
>
> I did not know what to say.
>
> "No remember, Papa's and Mama's faces. No remember. Yoel, I remember. Reb Binyomin, I remember. With animals and birds and flowers. Not Papa and Mama. Not all uncles and aunts and cousins." (17)

He does not go on to explain what happened to him, or why he cannot forget the memory of Reb Binyomin. He waits until later in the story to tell Davita, telling it in two parts; he first introduces the characters (himself, Yoel, and Reb Binyomin) and the fact that they helped rebuild the synagogue in his village. He concludes the story when he and Davita go rowing on the lake in Prospect Park.

Noah's story belongs to both him and Reb Binyomin. He does not go into depth about what happened to him in the concentration camps; he limits his description to the fact that he drew pictures, but does not explain what he drew (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 30-31). Before the Nazis took him away from his village, he and his brother decided to help Reb Binyomin rebuild the synagogue. Reb Binyomin tells him that the

village had deteriorated after World War I but that fixing the synagogue is wonderful; he tells Noah: "'you could have lived without [fixing the synagogue] . . . But you have the talent. You are Bezalel,[41] you are the first to build an ark out of the wilderness. What marvelous things God puts in our path to overcome'" (62). Reb Binyomin is pleased that although Noah could have avoided the rebuilding, he has instead embraced it, and that the rabbi says God will be pleased. As a result of their efforts, the rebuilding of the synagogue unites the various Jewish sects around the village. Noah tells Davita:

> The Labor Zionists arrived one evening, about ten strong. Then the Revisionists and those brazen members of the left, the Bundists, came to lend a hand. They called it "Our Wooden Synagogue." Even some Hasidim poked their heads inside to see what was going on, and they stayed and they worked. (62)

Noah suggests that a Jewish revival comes to his village, unifying the different sects. When the festival of Rosh Hashana[42] begins, the people sense a renewed "'holiness of the place'" (64). However, their celebrations are interrupted because on the second day, "in the middle of the morning service, the German army arrived . . . They collect[ed] Jews and we all watch[ed] Germans burn the wooden synagogue'" (64-65). Reb Binyomin, unable to deal with the burning of the synagogue, kills himself by jumping off the burning building; he does not say anything, but issues a "single long loud scream" (65).

Noah's story has obvious Biblical allusions to Noah and the flood. When God decides to destroy the people of the earth for their wickedness, he also decides to save the Biblical Noah and his family. When the Biblical Noah finds land, he offers a sacrifice to

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[41] Bezalel was a craftsman named in Exodus who is revered for having wisdom and knowledge, and being loved by God. He is known for building the temple in the desert.

[42] The Jewish festival for their new year. See Appendix: A Glossary of Jewish Terms.

God for saving him, and God promises that he will never flood the world again. I do not mean to suggest that God destroys Kravlov because the citizens are wicked and only saves Noah because he is pious. Instead, I suggest that like the Biblical Noah who built the ark to rebuild the world after the flood, Noah, too, helped build an ark that rebuilt his community. Reb Binyomin and Noah reconstruct the sacred ark of the synagogue that unifies the various Jewish sects in the community, bringing together ultra-Orthodox and liberal Jews. The departure from the Biblical story is that God does not save a newly revived community; instead, there is no one who intercedes on their behalf. The title of the novella, "The Ark Builder," refers to Noah, who helped reconstruct the synagogue in Kravlov, Poland, and to the story of Reb Binyomin whose death deeply affects Noah. He tells Davita: "I see no other face but Reb Binyomin. I know my father, my mother, my brother Yoel, my sister. But I do not see them. Reb Binyomin I see. He leaps toward fire and clouds" (58). His aunt suggests that "'God saved him for a reason,'" but Davita never indicates the reason, nor does Noah seem to understand (8). "The Ark Builder" is the first narrative in which Davita's desire to hear stories helps another person find healing. Noah has not completely worked through the horrors of the Holocaust, but he has begun to deal with them.

In the second novella from *Old Men at Midnight*, "The War Doctor," Davita does not play an active role in the narrative. As the novella opens, Davita is a post-graduate student working on her dissertation, and she has taken an interest in her university's seminar about the Soviet Union. Her department gives her the task of bringing Leon Shertov to the seminars, which occupies the first few pages of the novella where she and

Leon briefly discuss the upcoming seminar. At breakfast, she questions him about his past:

> She asked him if he'd ever written anything about his early life.
>
> He said no, but there were stories he could tell, stories about *his* Red Calvary, stories about a war doctor. "But I would never put anything in writing."
>
> "Then your stories will die with you."
>
> "So they will. Who needs stories of yet another Jew?"
>
> "I need them. Without stories there is nothing. Stories are the world's memory. The past is erased without stories." (74)

Although Davita does not have an active role throughout the narrative, her plea to Leon Shertov that he write his stories convinces him to write about the war doctor, for whom the novella is titled. He writes out his stories and sends them to Davita in the mail. In the opening of the novel, he laments that "[h]e was fifty-eight years old. He did not know what else to do with his life. In so many ways his life was over now" (71).

Like Noah, Leon is a man attempting to find his place in a new world. Where Noah struggles to learn English as well as to cope with the trauma of the Holocaust, Leon must find a new place in non-Communist America. As his narrative unfolds, he also grapples with his past as a Soviet interrogator – which often left him abusing people: "I had plenty of work and I was very good at what I did . . . I had no regrets. Those who came before me were enemies of the people, swine, mad dogs, saboteurs, degenerates" (109).

When Leon meets Pavel Rubinov, the war doctor for whom the story is named, Leon is wounded and in a hospital. Pavel notices that Leon is Jewish and asks him to teach him Hebrew so that he can read the sacred language. He tells Leon that "I am sure than I will die in this war, and I wish to die with certain words in my heart and on my lips. There is no point to running away anymore" (87). Although Leon's Jewishness is never a source of comfort or support for him (in fact, he tries to hide it throughout the novella[43]) he agrees to teach Pavel. Their lessons threaten Leon's place in the army when an injured Cossack in the bed next to him warns: "You Yid bastard, when the Whites come I myself with pleasure will tear your arm off" (87).

To repay Leon's tutoring, Pavel helps him escape before the Whites arrive. He has false documents made for Leon that allow him to travel without any problems. He does not think he will ever see the doctor again. When he escapes, Leon returns to his village, only to learn that everyone who had lived there had been killed (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 94). Like Noah before him, he is the last of his village. Because he has no village to return to, he returns to the Soviet army. He becomes a different person while in the army, moving above his previous rank when he becomes an interrogator for the Soviet Union.

At the height of Stalin's regime, Leon begins to worry that the government he serves may not be as safe for him as he once thought. And although he is told that he will not have to worry about being Jewish because he is good at his job, he worries nonetheless. When Stalin demands that all doctors be taken into custody because he believes that the doctors conspire against him, Pavel ends up a prisoner. At first, Leon

[43] Even his name is an attempt to hide his Jewish origins. When he returns to the army, a major tells him that Kalman Sharfstein – his real name – "'will not do, no, no, it will not do, how will it do if you go among our peasants or are ever with foreign diplomats'" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 100).

does not recognize the "starved, shrunken" man whom he sees, but when he responds to the name "Comrade Doctor Pavel Rubinov," Leon is shocked (148-149). As he exits the prison cell, he hears the doctor chanting in Hebrew: "'O God, do not be silent; do not look aloof; do not be quiet, O God,'" (149). When he goes home that night, he has difficulty sleeping because he hears knocking on his apartment door, but when he checks the door, no one is there.

The fact that Pavel is a prisoner, who Leon knows will be killed, unsettles him. However he does not attempt to help him escape, as Pavel had aided him. After Stalin dies and the interrogators are told to "start cleaning up the doctors," Leon cannot erase the memory of the war doctor. He does not imagine him as the person in the cell but as the doctor who many times attempted to save his hand. Although Leon remains in the country for several years after Stalin's death, he does not try to find the war doctor before he escapes Soviet Russia. When he mentions the doctor again, he mentions his funeral in Moscow: "I attended the funeral, observing from a distance" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 156).

Leon cannot bring himself to come near Pavel's funeral because of guilt. Although in the middle of the narrative he mentions that he has no regrets, by the close of the narrative, he asks for forgiveness. After having driven, walked, and crawled his way to freedom, Leon tells Davita that when he crossed into West Germany, he felt:

> All the anguish I caused others in my zealous protection of that once splendid dream; all that emptying of hope and civilization I inflicted upon those who stood before me; all the many questions I had asked as an act of wounding and all the answers I received through another's screaming; all

> the worlds I permanently altered in the hearts and the minds of people – for all those deeds and a great many more, I uttered, as I stepped into freedom, a Russian word, "*Proschay*," which means "Good-bye forever." And also means "Forgive me." (159)

Although Leon tells Davita that he would not write down his story because it is just another story about a Jew and there are too many of those already, his story is not about being Jewish so much as it is about healing his memories. Leon remembers the war doctor and honors him for saving his life, whereas Leon is unable to save his. When Davita retells his story in one of her collections of short stories, the experiences of Leon Shertov and Pavel Rubinov exist forever as part of the collective Jewish memory. The concluding novella of *Old Men at Midnight* completes the Davita narratives and further illustrates her fascination with stories, as well as the healing properties of story.

In "The Trope Teacher," Benjamin Walter struggles to put together his past, and Davita is there to help him. His narrative fluctuates between complete sentence structure with a linear progression and the fluidity of stream of consciousness. His narrative changes between reality and memory as he tries to put together his memoir. While writing his memoirs, he easily puts together his mid-life up until the present, but he cannot find the beginning, "nothing to which he would connect his later life – and how does one write a life without a seed, a source, a commencement?" (218). While struggling to sort through his early life, he decides to visit his new neighbor – Davita. During their first encounter, Benjamin tells her about his inability to finish his memoirs. She recommends that he talk out his history, that voicing his memories might aid him in uncovering the memories he wants (169-170).

On a trip to Chicago, Benjamin purchases a book by Davita and reads her stories. He considers them strange tales about people who are "all nearing the end of their active lives, all tangled in memories of the past, which come to them too late and return nothing, not an echo, not a whisper, not a hope" (176). Although he does not understand them, when he places the book into the seat pocket on the airplane, it "seemed to be sending forth tendrils that were sliding toward him. The stories were a *presence*" (176). When he returns, Davita is there to hear his stories. She tells him: "'Like all writers, I am eager for good stories'" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 178). Although they do not discuss his past that night, in the moments before he sleeps, he recalls the trope teacher: "Why have I suddenly recalled the trope teacher? A quickening beat of the heart in the swiftly gathering clouds of sleep" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 182).

When Benjamin and Davita finally begin to discuss his past, she starts by playing a word association game with him. She initiates with the word "war," because Benjamin is an acclaimed professor of warfare. She wants to uncover why Benjamin has such a keen interest in warfare as opposed to another subject, and then his story begins. Just as the stories of Noah and Leon are about another character in relation to themselves so, too, is Benjamin's. He remembers Isaac Zapinski, his trope teacher. While preparing for his bar mitzvah, Benjamin is curious about his father's friendship with Isaac but is unable to find adequate answers. He knows that his father and Isaac served in World War I and that one of them attempted to desert, but he never knows which one. When Benjamin recites his speech for his bar mitzvah and he includes a large section on the cowardliness of desertion, Isaac becomes angry. Their relationship changes after that, yet he learns what he needs to, achieves his bar mitzvah, and does not visit Isaac any more. Benjamin

often reads the Scroll of the Law in the synagogue because he has developed a good storytelling voice, but Isaac is not a part of his life again until Isaac decides to return to Europe.

Upset that Isaac plans to return to Europe, Benjamin asks him why he plans to leave. Isaac never answers him. Years go by, and when he begins to read accounts of World War II, Benjamin is shocked to know that Isaac went back to a continent full of anti-Semitism and death. When Benjamin graduates from high school, he enlists in the war with the "insane notion that I might meet Mr. Zapinski" (239). He tells Davita that during the war Isaac "became a sort of talisman to me – a creature of magic and enchantment" who tells him "when to zig to the right and when to zag to the left, when to lie prone, when to jump up" (239, 256-257). He acknowledges that people do strange things to stay alive, and Isaac had been his talisman for survival.

At the close of Benjamin's story, he tells Davita that while part of an advancing infantry, he ran into death camp survivors. He tells her that he could barely recognize them because they were so emaciated. One of them grabs hold of Benjamin and asks him, "'Warum?': and he added in Yiddish, 'Why did you take so long?; and again, 'Why? Why?'" (259). He continues his narrative by telling Davita that he found Isaac in that death camp, "half covered with earth and quicklime in a trench in the mass cemetery" (261). However, we are not sure if he found the actual Isaac, or if he speaks metaphorically; he later comments that: "I walked around the camp. Everywhere I went I saw Mr. Zapinski, dead and dead and dead in the vile exhausted earth" (264).

When Isaac begins to teach Benjamin, he tells him: "First, I will teach you the notes and the grammar of the notes. Then I will teach you the meaning behind the

grammar. And if I see that you have truly mastered that, I will teach you the magic of this music" (215). Like his teacher, Davita attempts to help Benjamin uncover first the significant names from his past; she then helps him uncover the significance of Isaac – what he did that so affected Benjamin. But the magic that Isaac speaks of is like the rams that Davita mentions, and Benjamin does not see the connections until the end of the novella. When he concludes his story of Isaac, Benjamin calls him "an antique, a disgrace. He should never have gone back to Europe" (267).

I would argue that, like the stories before it, "The Trope Teacher" is one of Davita's written stories. When Benjamin leaves her home, only to return moments later, he finds Davita bent over a notebook, writing his story: "She moved her lips, mouthed her words in silence, cocked her head this way and that. 'Warum,' he heard her say" (271). She has begun to write out his story, and she tells him that his life is full of "'causes, connections, and rams. All over the place'" (272). As the novella closes, Benjamin begins to see the ghost of Isaac, first in his home, then limping towards the woods. He worries, thinking the figure he sees is a burglar, until he hears the whispered word: warum. Realizing that he said the word and had begun to chant the trope, he breaks down and "sees as he had never seen before the exposed roots and tangles of long-buried connections, and was overcome with infinite sorrow" (273).

In each of the novellas from *Old Men at Midnight*, Davita is the listener for the three men. The back cover of the novel labels her "the lightening rod that draws their words out of a dark emotional sky." Yet Davita is more than that. The narratives are not told directly by the men but through the lens of Davita's imagination. Her narrative voice interrupts in "The Ark Builder"; she writes a story about an ex-KBG colonel, the story of

"The War Doctor"; and it can be inferred that she writes "The Trope Teacher" because, as the novella closes, we find Davita writing in her notebook, much in the same way that she did in "The Ark Builder." However, I do not think that a lightening rod is an appropriate metaphor for Davita. She is a harp like the one she admired as a child.

DAVITA AND THE HARP

The door harp is a constant image that Davita returns to throughout *Davita's Harp*. She loves the music it plays as someone enters her home, and after Channah and Ezra marry, the door harp is placed in her room. Jakob Daw tells her that a writer is like a harp, and the harp becomes a central image in her imagination; she places in the harp her memories of Jakob Daw's stories, her dead father, the dead Jakob Daw, and the little bird from Picasso's *Guernica*. When Davita feels isolated or betrayed, she turns to the harp as a metaphor for her imagination and her ability to use that to overcome reality. The image of the harp provides comfort for Davita.

However, the image of the harp not only provides comfort for Davita, but it is also a representation for what she becomes as a writer. When Potok discusses the harp in relation to Davita, he expresses the transformations that are possible through contact with the harp:

> It's through the writer that the world and its winds are heard. But remember, that the harp is an instrument and the winds that go through it, that hit it, are not the same as the music of the winds that come from it. Transformations take place as a result of the contact with the harp. The

> harp is capable of angelic music and also capable of some heavy strumming. And I think it's the fundamental responsibility of a writer to deal with both the angelic and the darkness. (Gilnett 143)

None of the three men from *Old Men at Midnight* tell their stories without Davita's help. She is there to provide an outlet for their experiences because, as she says, without memories, the past is forgotten. She takes on a serious responsibility in the Jewish tradition, that of storyteller. She wants the stories for herself but also to share with the world, and in doing so she becomes a modern psalmist to God.

Although Davita claims that her parents named her after "my father's raucous uncle, who drowned in a yachting accident off Bar Harbor a few weeks after the wedding," the connection to the Biblical David is apparent (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 4). David is considered to be the author of Psalms,[44] the collection of praises to God, laments of his absence (post-Bathsheba), and didactic poems. The image of David and his harp is a powerful one in the Jewish tradition. Ezra Dinn tells Davita:

> King David was a great musician. When he slept his harp hung from the wall over his bed. The winds are strong in Jerusalem. Each night the wind would blow through the strings of the harp and the harp would begin to sing. King David would wake and listen awhile to the music of his harp, then spend the rest of the night studying Torah so he could be a strong and wise king. (Potok, *Davita's Harp* 165)

David is a unique king in Jewish history because he is the second king of Israel but the first to be chosen by God. In Biblical history, Israel cries out to God for a king, but Samuel warns them that a king would deter their worship from God and even tells them

[44] He is considered the author, except in places where the Psalm lists a particular author other than David.

that the king they want would ruin them. The people of Israel do not listen and instead choose Saul as king because he appears to be the logical choice because of his extensive military background. However, Israel ends up in several battles, narrowly missing defeat, and Saul does not seem like the best choice. When God tells Samuel to find the chosen king for Israel, he goes to Jesse and is shown David, a small shepherd boy. Saul learns that God has chosen David to be king but chooses not to obey God and decides to have David killed. David is rescued by Saul's son Jonathon and is hidden in the mountains. Not long after, Saul commits suicide before he can be taken by the Philistines. Israel crowns David, and God promises that his line will last forever. David is a successful king, uniting the people, establishing Jerusalem, and laying plans for the temple (I and II Samuel).

When Davita tells Noah her name, he responds, "Like David. Davita" (Potok, *Old Men at Midnight* 10). Although her parents may have named her for a drowned uncle, the stronger namesake of King David is more important to Davita. Just as David used his harp to play his psalms to God, so too does Davita play her harp to carry her stories to someone who listens. And just as the harp played the winds of Jerusalem and awoke David, Davita's harp plays the songs of the lost and suffering. Davita does not awaken to study Torah all night, but she does awaken to present the stories of the world around her. It is Davita as the writer, as the harp, who brings forth the memories of Noah, Leon, and Benjamin. When the men come in contact with her, they go away transformed: Noah begins to cope with survivor trauma; Leon sorts through his KGB involvement; and Benjamin begins to understand the connections between his life and the lives of others, and he begins to see the ram in the bush.

Because the harp belongs to Davita rather than to a male character and because it is through Davita's involvement that people find healing, Potok demonstrates that she is a strong female character. She is a manifestation of Potok's crises of faith as well as his own feminist leanings. Davita is not just a female character; she is a feminist character who challenges Judaism's patriarchy. She – not Asher Lev, Reuven Malter, nor any of Potok's other male characters – is the character who brings the pain of suffering of others to God. She carries that responsibility because she is able to provide what no male character is able to give – the necessary compassion to relate to all people and the willingness to question accepted traditions.

She mingles the sacred fire of the Torah with the strange fire of feminism, but unlike the sons of Aaron, she is not struck down. She develops a strong sense of self through her mother's example, and she continues to develop it within the Jewish tradition. However, when she does not receive the Akiva Award, she has to reevaluate her position in both worlds – her world of gender equality and the Jewish world of gender differences. Ultimately, she cannot exist in an Orthodox world, but she chooses to remain Jewish rather than leave behind religion altogether. In a post-Holocaust world, it is impossible for Jewish people to avoid confrontations between their faith and secularism; however, Potok would argue that it is possible to mingle faith and secularism without losing a sense of identity, and that the experience is enriching. Davita does not want to leave behind her faith because it gives purpose and meaning to her life. As Judaism enters into a new age of being, characters like Davita exist to help people along the way.

CONCLUSION

"There was a time when most of us heard a single melody, repeatedly played and quickly learned. Today, we register cacophonies." – Chaim Potok[45]

Chaim Potok's fiction is filled with characters who struggle to maintain their Jewish identities when they confront the twentieth-century Jewish world, a world scarred by Holocaust tragedy, altered by war, and conflicted with Western culture. The core-to-core cultural confrontations of Reuven Malter, Asher Lev, and Davita are fictional manifestations of his attempt to reconcile his crisis of faith, and in doing so, he voices the possible questions of others. He writes:

> Not so long ago, around the turn of the last century, we thought that if we discovered the truth about ourselves and our world we might live in bliss . . . As this century begins its turn, spinning us into a new millennium, we know that those truths we discovered have left us diminished and sundered. ("Invisible Map of Meaning" 43)

He wants to answer for the changing world while working within the framework of Judaism, and he does this with his characters. However, the creation of Davita marks a unique change in Potok's fiction: she is the only female protagonist in his works. When he discusses the creation of Davita in interviews, he cites that her purpose in his fictional world is to be a feminist writer; however, as she develops in *Davita's Harp*, "The Seven of the Address," and *Old Men at Midnight*, she becomes a better defined character than any of his others.

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[45] "Invisible Map of Meaning" pg. 19.

But can a male author write a believable feminist character? Can a believable feminist character exist apart from a narrative that is feminist? And can a man write a believable feminist character when he is part of an essentially patriarchal religion? Hélène Cixous would argue that all three of these possibilities can be attained by a male author; he only needs to recognize that concepts of gender are ambiguous constructs that cannot be the only factors that define identity. Further still, the nature of female and feminine are varied experiences that transcend classification:

> There is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have *in common* I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible. (Cixous 245 – 246)

So while experiences like menstruation and mother-daughter relationships will always have a place in the woman's development novel, the individual experiences of women vary. Not all female characters will experience the oppression of Orthodox Judaism like Davita, but they will all experience a clash with a patriarchal society – at least until men are "capable of loving love and hence capable of loving others and of wanting them, of imagining the woman who would hold out against oppression and constitute herself as superb, equal" (Cixous 249). Male-authored female characters can remain flat and static, or male-authored female characters can become feminists, those women who decide to hold out against oppression.

Although Potok admits that Davita's story is not so much his as it is of his wife.[46] he recalls that while writing the Davita narratives he uncovered feminine traits in himself that he had not expected to find. He referred to finding those traits as "an incredible experience to recognize a very powerful feminine element inside myself" (Kauvar 83). Cixous and Karen Offen would also contend that it is not enough that a man recognizes that gender does not fully define people but that he acts on this knowledge as well. Feminists, regardless of gender, must do something about the oppression they see around them. As a writer, Potok fought ultra-Orthodox beliefs about the roles of women in the synagogue in Jerusalem as well as in his fiction. Writing is an activity that can cause change, "the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (Cixous 249).

In continuing to develop Davita, Potok creates a stronger feminist character, a character who, despite Judaism's perceived gender limitations, brings more healing to the Jewish community than Reuven Malter or Asher Lev. The combination of Davita's intellect and compassion allows her to interact with characters who carry psychological wounds and to help them renew their sense of place within Judaism – the one thing that Potok felt that twentieth-century Judaism needed. Like her namesake, the psalmist David, Davita collects various psalms for God. Yet her psalms are not meant as praise, but as a cry of "Why?" Her harp plays the songs of the people who feel isolated and are seeking answers. While Potok may have initially created Davita to be the feminist writer in his universe, she has become like David's harp, the piece through which others' stories are told. The stories change, depending on the song to be played, but all her stories contain confusion and underlying optimism, despite the anger and sadness evoked by

[46] At least as far as Davita and his wife were both denied valedictory awards because of their gender.

twentieth century events. Davita, as Potok's harp, aids people in finding their place within a world that no longer provides a single possibility for existence. She is there to help people make sense of the cacophonies.

APPENDIX

A Glossary of Jewish Terms

Aggadah (aggadic) – a phrase used to describe the commentaries that accompany any topic that is not based on the halakha. The aggadic writings discuss various topics like Jewish folklore, medicinal practices, and anecdotes. The Aggadah is considered to be a common sense understanding for how to live a proper Jewish life.

Bar mitzvah – the time when a boy comes of age in Jewish tradition (at the age of thirteen). The transition between childhood and adulthood is marked by celebrations, where the boy recites a part of the Talmud and gives a lecture in front of the synagogue. After the celebrations, he is responsible for his place in Judaism and is allowed to take an active role in the rituals. The actual name for coming of age in Jewish custom is B'nai Mitzvah. The qualifiers "bar" (boy) and "bat" (girl) signify the gender of the recipient.

Halakha – Jewish religious law. There are 613 commandments and various rabbinical literatures included in halakha. The halakha deals with the legal side of all secular and non-secular matters.

Kaddish – the Jewish prayer for death and mourning. The prayer is said every day over an eleven-month period, usually in the presence of others. The Kaddish prayer is an exaltation of God and his greatness, acknowledging that while He may take people away, He is still God. Customarily, the prayer is said only by men, not because women are denied the option outright, but because women's spiritual duties require them to be in the home, rather than in the synagogue reciting Kaddish every day.

Mehitzah – the curtain that separates the men from the women in the Orthodox synagogue. The idea is that the men will be able to focus their attention on God, rather than on the women around them.

Minyan – the religious quorum in Jewish custom that is composed of at least ten men who have accomplished their bar mitzvahs. Halakha law requires that a quorum be present when prayers, such as the Kaddish, are to be said. Historically, women have been

omitted from the minyan but have been allowed to partake in it by Reform and Conservative Judaism.

Mosaic Curses – the curses that God promises for Israel if they do not obey the Commandments. The curses are found in Deuteronomy 28. The Curses depict such a frightening image of God that they are said quickly when they are recited.

Niddah – a menstruating woman. Jewish law requires that a woman separate herself from her husband while she menstruates and for seven days afterwards. She is ritually impure until she has undergone a purification bath (mivkah). Niddah also refers to a series of family purification laws in the tractate of the Talmud by the same name.

Rosh Hashanah – the Jewish festival for the New Year. The holiday includes the blowing of the shofar (an instrument made from a ram's horn) and the reciting of special prayers. The festival marks the beginning of the new year for people, animals, and legal contracts.

Shul – the synagogue.

Smicha – the ordination of a rabbi in Jewish tradition.

Tzaddik (pl. tzaddikim) – the rabbi of the Hasidic Jews. Often associated with special powers, this Rebbe, as he is called, is believed to perform miracles and have wisdom and knowledge beyond the average persons. He has denied his own desires so that his only desires are the desires of God. The position is inherited, usually passing on from father to son.

Yeshiva – a generic term for the schools associated with Orthodox Judaism that teach young children Talmud as well as other subjects such as mathematics and English. Higher yeshivas, usually post-high school, are dedicated to teaching Talmud and Torah, and historically did not allow women to enroll (that has changed).

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