

## REIMAGINING OF ANITA DIAMANT'S *THE RED TENT* INTO A REVISIONED FEMINIST HISTORY.

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### Abstract

Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* discusses the history of the Israelites from a different perspective. The author tells the story of the biblical character Dinah, Jacob's daughter and Joseph's sister, vizier of Israel according to the Hebrew Bible. In the Bible, Dinah's story is mentioned briefly. Diamant tries to give a voice to the character of Dinah as well as her mothers. The novel *The Red Tent* is a path-breaking work and a landmark in the history of feminism. *The Red Tent* is a novel more sympathetic to female characters than male and the first half of the novel is pretty much all about the relationships between the women. One of the strongest themes in the novel is women's relationships. The paper tries to bring how the author has tried to envision the biblical story of Dinah into feminist fiction.

**Keywords:** revision, feminist fiction, radical departure, feminist retelling.

Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* discusses the history of the Israelites from a different perspective. The author tells the story of the biblical character Dinah, Jacob's daughter and Joseph's sister, vizier of Israel according to the Hebrew Bible. In the Bible, Dinah's story is mentioned briefly. The story says that Dinah is raped by an Egyptian Prince. Simon and Levi, two of her brothers avenge Dinah by killing all the men in the city. After that, Dinah is never mentioned again in the Bible. Diamant mentions on her website as "Dinah is one of the silent women of the Bible. Her silence intrigued me... gave me a window. When there was silence, I created three hundred pages." The author tries to give a voice to the character of Dinah as well as her mothers. The novel *The Red Tent* is a path breaking work and a land mark in the history of feminism.

The protagonist Dinah weaves the story of her life with her mothers and brothers who are a part of her life. Every theological work speaks highly about the clans but fails to speak about the women in the clans. Diamant reconstructs it and frames it from a feminist perspective. She lays the construction of the feminist retelling by giving the women a required space in her novel *The Red Tent*. The myth of women perfects the changeable and permanent myth of the human condition, the division of humanity into two classes according to gender. It projects into the world of platonic ideas of what is experienced or conceptualized through experience. This is a transcendental idea, an absolute truth. It is a truth that women are the “other” than men which are felt in desire, embrace and love. But, the real relationship between men and women is reciprocal. It is the mutual recognition of free beings who confirm one another’s freedom. The myths of women are incompatible and incoherent. Each of the myths of omen is incompatible and incoherent. Each of the myths claims to have the sole truth. The novel tries to bring out the hidden truth about Dinah’s family through the novel.

Simon de Beauvoir in one of her chapters in *Second Sex* “Myth and Reality” brings the quality of a supposed good woman expected by society. “they can appear in some other settings at home with their fathers, brothers, husbands, or lovers as guardian angels” (287). Diamant too depicts her characters as good women who dedicate their full time to the welfare of their husbands. Dinah explains that her father Jacob has four wives, so she has four mothers. Leah is Dinah’s biological mother. She learns from her mother and her aunts. The women fulfil their duties by bearing sons, but they long for daughters.

*The Red Tent* is a novel more sympathetic to female characters than male and the first half of the novel is pretty much all about the relationships between the women. One of the strongest themes in the novel is women’s relationships. Diamant’s vision of this time in history feels so authentic; it is as if the writer observes the family of Jacob. She imagines the concerns of the women in the group and the dynamic between them has been created by their contrasting personalities. Diamant herself says on her website as:

*The Red Tent* is not a translation but a work of fiction. Its perspective and focus on the female characters distinguishes it from the Biblical account, in which women are usually peripheral and often silent. By giving Dinah a voice and by providing texture and content to the sketchy Biblical descriptions, my book is a radical departure from the historical text.

Diamant takes liberty with biblical sources. She richly illustrates the world of Laban’s family and the community of women formed by his daughters. She brings up how they pave the way for creating a well-known clan. She beautifully describes the sisters. Diamant portrays Rachel as a beautiful woman as mentioned in the Bible. Her skin is golden, honeyed and perfect. She is small-boned and has muscular hands and a husky voice that seems to belong to a much larger woman. Her nickname is Tuki which means sweetness.

Rachel has an innate sense of fresh water. Rachel smells like water. Wherever she walks, the scent of fresh water fills the entire area. It is an impossible smell, green and delightful in those arid, dusty regions. She has been the reason for her family's prosperity. There are hopes for Rachel to become a water witch. A water witch can find hidden wells and underground water. She does not fulfil their hope. The aroma of sweet water clung to her robes. When Jacob sees her, he falls in love with her at first sight. She is to be the supposed first bride of Jacob. Before a few days before the wedding, Rachel fears her wedding night. Zilpah encourages her to confess her worries. On the day of her wedding, she panics and makes arrangements with Leah to take her place. Leah takes her place and becomes the first wife of Jacob even though Jacob has asked for Rachel as his wife. Diamant reconstructs this biblical story from a feminine perspective. In the Hebrew Bible, it is Laban who interchanges the brides and makes Leah get married to Jacob. He works for the next seven years for Laban to earn the bride price Rachel. Diamant through the novel proves herself as a feminist and delivers the necessary feminist retrospective. She gives the character to think and acts as the leader, but not as the slave.

Jacob was cheated on by Leah and Rachel. But, he performed his duty prior needed as a husband. But he asks for a dowry from his father-in-law. He says:

“I will take another tenth of your herd for relieving you of your ill favoured daughter. And to be fair, I will work for you another seven months, as the bride price for Leah.” (41)

Diamant alternates the original descriptions that are mentioned in the Bible. She turns Leah's mismatched eyes into an identity of her own. Everyone is frightened of Leah's eyes as they resemble the eyes of a witch. Many are convinced that she is a devil. The midwife cries out that a witch has been brought forth and Leah has to be drowned. But Dinah's grandmother slaps her and names the child Leah, which means mistress.

It is said in the Hebrew Bible in the Chapter Genesis 29:17 as “Leah had tender eyes” (35). It is argued as to whether the adjective tender means delicate and soft or weary. The Torah, the holy book of the Jews, cites how Leah's eyes have become weak. Dinah seeks to tell her version of the story and corrects the mistakes in the tale of her family. For example, in this story, Leah is destined to marry Jacob's older twin brother Esau. The two brothers are opposites, Jacob is a god-fearing scholar and Esau is a hunter who indulges in idolatry and adultery. In the Torah, it is mentioned that the eldest daughter will be married to Esau, and the youngest daughter will be married to Jacob. Hearing this Leah has spent most of her time weeping and praying to God to change her destined mate. Thus, the Torah describes her eyes as soft from weeping. God hearkens to Leah's tears and prayers and allows her to marry Jacob even before Rachel does.

Diamant uses this parable in her novel to make the narrative interesting. She delivers the parable through the voice of the protagonist Dinah. She says Leah's vision is perfect. Dinah says about the parable in uncertainty: “According to one of the more ridiculous fables embroidered

around my family's history, she ruined her eyes by crying a river of tears over the prospect of marrying my uncle Esau" (12). According to Dinah her mother's eyes are not weak or rheumatic. The truth is that her eyes make others weak and most people look away rather than face them. One of her eyes is blue as lapis, and the other is green as Egyptian grass. The author firmly stresses the discolouration of her eyes as an identity of Leah. This unusual defect in her creates a stronger character next to Dinah in the novel.

The novel speaks about birth as the beginning of life. Diamant has researched female medicine, midwifery, birth control and abortion which have been used in the ancient Eastern regions. She seeks details about the tools that are used by women at the time of delivery. The birthing reeds and flat bricks are historical. She writes about food, clothes, midwifery, family arrangements, and customs of the ancient Near East. Using historical cultural information and her imagination, she weaves rich detail into her retelling of the lives of Jacob's women folks.

The importance of motherhood is beautifully portrayed by the author. Motherhood is the most beautiful thing that can ever happen to a woman. Diamant being a woman sketches out beautifully the emotions and pains hidden behind the experiences of motherhood. She has not failed to deliver the happiness of a newborn in a family through her narration. When Rachel finds her pregnant she does not conceal it from anyone. Just like other women, she feels happy within herself about the new arrival. Leah goes to her mother and puts Adah's hands over her belly. The old woman hugs her daughter and says "I did not think I would live to see a grandchild" (43). Rachel is proud of her status as a head wife, and she is sure that she is going to give birth to a boy.

Leah bears eight children from Jacob, whereas Rachel has several miscarriages. The family shares the happiness with Leah and consoles Rachel in her grievances. When the happy noises of children surround them, the blessing is not equally distributed. After the miscarriage of Rachel, the sisters help her to regain strength by giving a fennel concoction. Rachel feels jealous of Leah so she is not able to smile at her. But Leah forgets everything and consoles her. To get rid of her barrenness, Rachel tries every remedy she knows. She wears only red and yellow the colours of life's blood and the talisman for healthy menstruation. She sleeps with her belly against trees which are sacred to the local goddesses. Whenever she sees running water, she lies down in it, hoping that the life of the river can inspire a new life within her. She dines on a snake which has the power to give birth to itself. Diamant lists the remedies undertaken by Rachel to overcome her barrenness. The opening of the mother's womb is considered the opening of a woman's life. According to Rachel, unless barrenness is overcome, she is not fit to be called a woman. After giving birth to her son, her husband and the child frame her identity as a woman.

The novel *The Red Tent* speaks about the influence of the family concept on the growth of an individual. It is unavoidable that a peaceful family renders a healthy atmosphere for the family members. This novel deals with the characters belonging to the Biblical past. But these characters are suitable for readers of modern ages too. The novel, which is a historical romance caters itself and delivers according to the tastes of the modern Jewish readers. Diamant by exploring the hidden facts of the clan stresses the concept of familial livelihood through her novel. Diamant can move women from the periphery of religious practice to the centre. The novel links the passions of the early Israelites to the ongoing traditions of the modern Jews. The writer succeeds in depicting the lives of women at that age and their faiths, beliefs, and their customs of that age.

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