

## The Wandering Womb at Home in *The Red Tent*:

An Adolescent Bildungsroman in a Different Voice

**H**ere is the scenario: I am sitting on the floor with a group of ethnically diverse 16- to 18-year-old girls, preparing to interview them about their responses to Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, because I am currently studying responses of sixty teen readers to first-person narration and have chosen these two novels for comparison. As I gather preliminary information about when, during the day, the girls might read, the following conversation erupts. I am quickly overwhelmed by the energy with which these girls gush about *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant. I am struck by the way in which they mirror my own childhood; they find what they call "school literature" meaningless and seek "good books" on their mothers' bookshelves, which they then orally recommend to one another. So emotional about the story of *The Red Tent* that they can barely speak, and indeed continually interrupt one another, they cite the way in which the contemporary novel revises the patriarchal story of Jacob; represents the concerns of girls in terms of emotion and relationship; and details the entire lifecycle of girl-to-woman through engaging first-person narration:

**Carol:** There are certain books I just can't put down.

**Laticia:** Seriously, I'll read until like three in the morning . . .

**Interviewer:** Like what?

**Carol:** Like *The Red Tent*!

**Laticia:** Oh yeah! *The Red Tent*!

**Interviewer:** *The Red Tent*? I just read *The Red Tent*. That's a really bizarre coincidence.

**Carol:** I picked it up, and it was like.. I started reading it when we were having standardized testing in school, and I was like rushing through the PSSAs [Pennsylvania System of State Assessment] so I could read the book . . .

**Evelyn:** Yeah, same with me!

**Carol:** . . . and after school, that was like all I did! It was like me trying to find time that I could just finish it.

**Laticia:** When I read that book, I started reading . . . I thought the cover looked interesting, my Mom had it, and I picked it up and just started reading in the middle. And I ended up reading like half the book, starting from the middle, and then I was like "I need to start from the beginning!" And I read the whole thing in like . . . like a day. I just sat and read it.

**Carol:** Yea, same with me. Took me about two days to read it just because I was so into it.

**Interviewer:** What was good about it?

**Carol:** All the stories. I mean I loved it. It was so passionate[ly] written, like you . . .

**Laticia:** . . . the way it was written was . . .

**Carol:** . . . worded . . .

**Laticia:** . . . and just like how you knew every emotion she was feeling, like from the time she was little until her death . . .

**Evelyn:** It was like they gave you such an insight on her life, and the people around her that..

**Laticia:** . . . and relationships and that . . .

**Carol:** Yeah! And it just made you feel like you were part of the story and you knew her and you were just . . . felt her emotions when like the bad things happened!

**Laticia:** Yeah.

**Evelyn:** . . . and . . .

**Laticia:** . . . and the Bible story is really about Joseph . . .

**Carol:** Yeah . . . (all “yes” agreements)

**Laticia:** And the fact that it’s about a sister that . . . if you . . . that . . . just skimming through, knowing you know, your normal Bible stories you don’t even hear about.

(all agree)

**Laticia:** Yeah, there’s like two passages about . . . you don’t even know the guy, the king, is Joseph . . .

**Evelyn:** . . . right . . . until she figures it out.

**Interviewer:** Her brother, you mean?

EXCLAMATIONS: OH IT WAS SO GOOD!

**Carol:** I was just so upset! I was like no . . .!

**Evelyn:** I seriously cried . . .

**Laticia:** I cried more in that book than any other book

I’ve ever read. I cried more . . .

**Carol:** Oh, I cried too . . .

**Evelyn:** Oh my God . . .

**Laticia:** So did I.

**Carol:** I bawled my eyes out!

**Evelyn:** I got all teary . . . it was just so . . . when her first husband died, was murdered . . .

**Carol:** That part was like . . . they made it seem so perfect, like her . . .

**Laticia:** And like I cried when her son, Moses, when Moses, he grew apart from her.

**Carol:** Yeah.

**Evelyn:** I cried then, too

**Carol:** You just kind of felt her alone . . .

**Laticia:** And then I cried at the end when it was really happy.

**Carol:** Yea. And just like her . . . she just seems so isolated from everyone during the second part of the book.

The girls complete this discussion by launching into a critique of the patriarchal canon taught in school and the “standardized testing” manner required by their “boring” language arts teacher. They decide to build the perfect (fantasy) English class on *The Red Tent*, full of discussions of “psychology” and in-depth study of “myth, legend, and ancient cultures.”

At the very moment in which fantasy works such as J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* and J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* are enjoying intense revitalization, girls are hungering for an exploration of female-centered myths, deities, worlds, and power-structures. I found a similar enthusiasm for *The Red Tent* in an individual interview conducted in another state (the group was from Bucknell, the individual from upper New York). In the latter case, I had again sat down to

interview a sixteen-year-old about *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and she promptly told me that her friend, who was “a feminist” and interested in women’s history because she wished to be an Obstetrician/Gynecologist, recommended *The Red Tent*, which then turned out to be the best book the interviewee had ever read. Girls are recommending it to one another and devouring its storytelling powers; these interviewees led me to a reconsideration of the novel as an adolescent novel. What follows is a discussion of the literary elements that allow the novel to appeal to adolescent women and grow their appreciation for contemporary women’s literature that speaks “in a different voice” (Gilligan) from the more masculine canon they expect in their school curriculum.

### The Female Self-in-Relation

Published in 1997, *The Red Tent* is the story of Dinah, Jacob’s daughter, growing up with her mother Leah and Leah’s various sisters, the wives of Jacob. The red tent is the communal menstruation tent for

the women of Jacob’s tribe, the place where the women retreat during the New Moon and undergo both ritual and rest, conversation and conflict. The novel recaptures or theorizes, depending on your point of view, a pre-patriarchal religion centered upon women and women’s bodies, narrated by a female character who is merely a passing reference in Genesis. Some of the book represents a girl’s point of view, as Dinah is growing up and discovering what womanhood means in her culture, but unlike in teen novels, the narration continues as Dinah grows older and wiser. She continues to develop in perspective and insight

until her death as a post-menopausal wisewoman and midwife.

One of the girls in the above group astutely reported that she likes “all the stories,” intuitively understanding that the novel’s story of Dinah is actually comprised of the many stories of her mothers, as articulated by the protagonist: “I am not certain whether my earliest memories are truly mine, because when I bring them to mind, I feel my mother’s breath on every word” (75). The breath of life experienced through the word bears the traces of maternal voices. Diamant divides the novel into four sections: the prologue, “My Mothers’ Stories,” “My Story,” and “Egypt.” The individual female protagonist’s story is thus insufficient without the context of her mother’s stories, which is a common theme in the female bildungsroman. Teachers of literature often contrast the individuality of the male self articulated at the beginning of Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, Chapter One, “I am Born,” with female narratives such as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which begins with and repeatedly features the stories of older family members. Family stories are intrinsic to girls’ understandings of themselves as selves in relation to others, as defined by [Carol Gilligan \(1982\)](#).

In telling the stories of her mothers, Dinah builds a nostalgic view of a tribe whose everyday life is run by many wives. Although there are tensions, the women function as a kind of matriarchal village and have an internal community, quite apart from the lives of men, with whom they do not even take meals. Although she is too young for the red tent, Dinah is the only daughter of Jacob’s tribe and is thus privileged to share in the restful, storytelling culture of the tent; it is where she is most at home, as a child romanced by many mothers. She has a liminal position whereby she can fetch things in and out of the tent, even waiting upon her menstruating and/or childbearing mothers. Her very life is structured by rhythms of women’s bodies and voices—by not only monthly rites but by various miscarriages (especially Rachel’s), births, and deaths. The women are preoccupied with fertility, a preoccupation mirrored by her mother’s worship of not Jacob’s one God but many gods, including the great mother and the idols that Rachel takes with her when Jacob decides that his tribe should separate from Laban and return to the land of his birth. Dinah’s liminality in being both

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speaker and receptacle of women's stories, both outside and inside the circle of Jacob's wives, mirrors the theme of transitional identity that adolescents are experiencing.

The novel is a means by which Diamant restores the concept of the female deity and the idea of the idol, linking women's everyday reality with the sacred and suggesting that spiritual stories of forgotten mothers and female communities need to be linked with developing girls. Judy Mann, in *The Difference: Discovering the Hidden Ways We Silence Girls*, evinces very strong feelings in her argument that the masculinity of God hinders girls' understanding of their powers, joining many feminist cultural critics who argue the various ways that girls experience themselves as less powerful than boys (White; American Association of University Women; Gilligan; Pipher; Orenstein; Chernin; Brumberg; Chodorow; Bordo; K. Martin; E. Martin). In literature, this picture is complicated because research has continually shown that girls read more fiction than boys (Smith & Wilhelm), and in my empirical research with readers (Blackford, *Out of this World*), I have found that girls reading all kinds of fiction, most of which they define as fantasy and do not understand as self-reflection, experience reading itself as an empowering adventure, regardless of textual content. In *The Red Tent*, we find the theme of female storytelling and listening as a means for connecting past and present, sacred and mundane, spirit and body, often divided in Western consciousness (Bordo). These story connections allow self-development, regardless of whether the stories have to do with the listener. The lives of today's readers look little like the lives depicted in the novel, as Diamant points out in the prologue:

And now you come to me—women with hands and feet as soft as a queen's, with more cooking pots than you need, so safe in childbed and so free with your tongues. You come hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me, and my mothers, and my grandmothers before them. (3)

The novel makes the argument that to develop a sense of context for the self, we need spaces and time for mothers and daughters to share stories beyond the stories of "great women." Is it not intriguing that one girl could only find space for reading by rushing through the PSSA, and that she sought substantial adult books on her mother's nightstand?

## Idolizing Female Experience and Body

In the novel, female deities and prophets abound. There are so many female goddesses, and they are known by so many names that they all seem to originate in the great mother, as suspected by those who study cross-cultural manifestations of goddess myths. In *The Red Tent*, maternal deities are neither gentle nor domestic. Maternal deities are terrible as well as life-celebratory. For example, the character of Rebecca is a kind of oracle, whom the tribe visits when they return to Jacob's land. Rebecca stands as a guardian of female ritual, demanding absolute vigilance in marking first blood in the old way, ways she knows are disappearing due to the ascendancy of the one God. In a pivotal scene, Rebecca rages against and banishes Jacob's brother's wife for failing to mark her own daughter's menarche in the old way, leaving the child scared and alone (without a community of women to initiate her into a womanly body) and

wasting the first blood rather than honoring the great mother by burying it in the earth with sacred rites. Rebecca strongly objects to the practice of hanging out blood-stained sheets of newly married women, a desacralization of female blood. With the particulars of a dramatic story, the novel captures the sense that the female body and the women who represent female ritual are at once both awe-inspiring and terrifying, similar to the paradox commented upon by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*: "The woman's body, with its potential for gestating, bringing forth and nourishing new life, has been through the ages a field of contradictions: a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability; a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil; a hoard of ambivalences, most of which have worked to disqualify women from the collective act of defining culture" (102).

While many critics have studied the vast reorganization of body image that takes place at menarche

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Whore dichotomy in the literary representation of women has stemmed from a sexist point of view. However, myths associated with goddess love and wrath, including fairy tales primarily passed down by female tellers (Warner), suggest that the female body itself has engendered paradoxical feelings in women themselves. In *The Woman in the Body*, Emily Martin conducts interviews with women and finds a lack of agency when women speak of the body; they speak of menstruation and pregnancy happening “to” them. And yet the female body does assert a life of its own throughout a woman’s life, times when it simply refuses to be “the body project” (Brumberg) people might wish it to be, and which marketers hope it to be. The experience of female rites of passage is not inevitably a passive Ophelia drowning (Pipher). Feminist movements that have revolutionized birthing have demonstrated that (Wertz).

But current discourses used to educate girls about their bodies do little to capture the wonder of the body. Michelle Fine shows that education materials lack “the discourse of desire,” and Joan Brumberg demonstrates the harmful effects of commercialized discourses of feminine hygiene products. The body demands symbolic understanding and interpretation. In my last project researching readers (Blackford, *Out of this World*), I was struck by how little adequate language girls have for the body (non-clinical or non-insulting); in a chapter tracing how girls identify with powerful animal characters and emphasize the tremendous movement, fluidity, and activity that one can experience with an animal body, I argue that identification with animals is a displacement of the

(e.g., Koff; Koff et. al.), anyone who remembers the raw experience of menstruation as a teen (before birth control pills, before having experienced one’s personal cycle and menstruation as routine) or the awe-inspiring and terrifying experience of giving birth understands this simultaneous terror and wonder at the female body. Critics have often claimed that the Madonna/

insecurity and awe they feel by having a female body that contemporary discourses cannot appropriately characterize. Literature welcomes the paradoxes inherent in experiencing a female body, and the passionately narrated story of *The Red Tent* conjoins the changing female body with discourses of desire and subjectivity.

Diamant uses the transitional period between old gods, including goddesses, and the new God to explore what is lost when women are alienated from ritual and from the powers of the female body, symbolized most fully by the shift from ritualizing female fertility to the circumcised penis (of the infant boy, no less, who could not be more dependent on grown women). There are many allusions to this new God as one who celebrates not life but death, who demands sacrifice of animals rather than food (seen as enormous waste) and who is rather hostile to the idea of family:

Zilpah told me that El was the god of thunder, high places, and awful sacrifice. El could demand that a father cut off his son—cast him out into the desert, or slaughter him outright. This was a hard, strange god, alien and cold, but, she conceded, a consort powerful enough for the Queen of Heaven, whom she loved in every shape and name. (13)

The female perspective criticizing Jacob’s worship comes in every shape and size; how could you take a new infant, at risk of death, and put him under the knife? How could you take a lamb, the product of so much careful husbandry, and kill him without eating him? And yet, the power of El is equal to the great female (maternal) deity because El is similarly woven from words, containing the power of larger-than-life story, particularly in the tale of Isaac:

Jacob was a weaver of words, and he would catch his eager audience in the threads of his tale, telling of the glinting knife, Isaac’s eyes wide with fright. The rescue came at the last possible moment, when the knife was at Isaac’s throat, and a drop of blood trickled down his neck, just like the tears falling from Abram’s brimming eyes. But then a fiery spirit stayed the old man’s hand and brought a pure white ram to be sacrificed in Isaac’s stead [. . .]. Years later, when his grandsons finally met the boy of the story, by then an old man, they were appalled to hear how Isaac stuttered, still frightened by his father’s knife. (61-2)

The novel, commonly understood as a fantasy of female community, is also a romance, a romance of story, the body, and both women and men. The tale of

Isaac's near-death is as equally compelling and dramatic as the "in the moment" awakening of Dinah to the murder of her husband at the hand of her brothers. Thus scenes of violence and sexual energy are linked, as they often are in adolescent and women's literature.

## Growing Up: The Nomad Voice of the Wandering Womb

In a very dramatic scene that all the girls mention, Dinah, a new bride after long negotiations, awakens to find that she is covered with the blood of her lover, whose throat has been cut. Her awakening into heterosexuality, which is her choice in the novel and not a rape, has consequences that are symbolic of menarche, when her mothers actually break her hymen with an idol and ensure she "marries" (bleeds into) the earth. The reader will notice that Dinah can only enjoy the red tent before she is a menstruating teenager; after menarche, she is quickly swept off her feet by the Prince of Shechem and soon thereafter wakes to his murder. Not only does the scene symbolize the dramatic self-change that occurs upon sexual awakening and marriage (to earth or a man), but it renders complete the separation between daughter and family-of-origin that is felt (if not always occurring) upon the transfer of affection to a sexual partner.

The act of murder drives Dinah to curse the land of her fathers and travel to Egypt, where she bears a son and is forgotten in the house of Jacob. The third section is simply titled "Egypt." Dinah's sojourn in Egypt, however, thematically develops the growing separation of Dinah from her mothers, the lessening of the authority of the red tent in the tribe, and the nomad rhythm of Dinah's voice, *actually* begun when the tribe first leaves Laban's land, when the narrator finds that she likes the style of living on the open road. The novel's vision of adolescence is an adventure into nomad homelessness that is *never* fully at home again because that is the nature of becoming an adult. The novel perfectly captures a psychoanalytic vision of human development, complicit with the language of desire that Peter Brooks argues motivates and drives forward all plots. While the theme of celebrating mothers is thus important, the structure and the homelessness of the female protagonist are also important to adolescent readers.

The remove of Jacob's tribe to the land of his birth characterizes the nomad rhythm of the novel begun after the point that Dinah's childhood is over. Long passages describing their exodus to Jacob's land initiate the narrator's pleasure in a wandering existence; although Rebecca takes an interest in Dinah, she finds that Dinah will not replace Rebecca in her position. In the new settlement of the tribe, where Dinah is also initiated into womanhood according to the old ways, Dinah begins to serve as midwife assistant to Rachel and thus takes on a continual existence of the traveler assisting other women. She and Rachel are invited into the city of Shechem to assist with a birth; in that royal palace, which follows the customs of Egypt, she and the Prince fall in love and become consorts, a match facilitated by the Prince's mother (Re-nefer). Though the family attempts to negotiate her brideprice with Jacob and sons, Jacob refuses and demands circumcision of the men, after which the men are slain by the sons of Jacob. Dinah wakes to find her lover's blood upon her. Dinah curses her father and his tribe, and is taken by Re-nefer back to her land of Egypt, where the past is erased (the story cannot be told), and Re-nefer demands that Dinah bear the son she is carrying in Re-nefer's name. Alone and never able to return to the red tent, ironically a place she has only enjoyed as a pre-menstruating girl, Dinah spends her time isolated in Egypt until she becomes a midwife companion and, late in life, moves to a river village to practice midwifery and finally attain a marriage with a carpenter, an image of equality.

Although a hunger for childhood remains throughout life, a teen can never really return to pre-teen existence. Dinah only returns to the land of her father when he is dying because Joseph, whose house she has attended for a birth, demands that she come (Joseph has obviously undergone his own story while she has been in Egypt), but Dinah is unknown and unimportant.

After Joseph attains his father's blessing, he tells Dinah, "He said nothing of you. Dinah is forgotten in the house of Jacob" (312). There is a glimmer of hope, though, as she is visited by a young girl of Jacob's tribe who likes to chat; in her stories of her relatives, she mentions that she has been told the terrible story of Dinah. The author thus concludes her theme of female storytelling with this idea that perhaps, among

women, stories of women's lives are kept alive and perhaps they are the sites for capturing forgotten tales of women in history. But they are, paradoxically, the product of homelessness rather than "domestic" tales.

Even in the prologue, the author presents the idea that female storytellers are, by nature, homeless or "detours" of history:

We have been lost to each other for so long.

My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust.

This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. (1)

The author and narrator position themselves as speaking from the footnotes of male history. As the scholars we are, we know that footnotes are incredibly

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important and point the reader to look between the lines. This process of daughters sorting through footnotes to recapture their mothers' stories is precisely what I found when I discovered that teen girls are so taken with *The Red Tent*. In that process, they have learned something about scholarship—that a tale lies between versions of histories, as written by uncommon men. They learn that a tale is a result of a point of view, and that different points of view change and enrich old stories. They also learn that women, in the "detours" off the main roads, are essentially lost and alone, the result of

broken chains of oral and female knowledges. This site of homelessness becomes a site of unique perspective.

Dinah's story is not developed in Genesis, al-

though she (ostensibly raped) is the named reason that the sons of Jacob commit the atrocious deed of demanding the men of the city be circumcised to recognize Jacob's one God, then slaying the men while they lie healing. In *The Red Tent*, Dinah has become the consort of the Prince of her own free will and overwhelming sexual desire. The slaying of her lover and husband becomes yet another symbol of the death to women's lives that occurs with the transfer from the old gods to the New, mirroring the fact that she is the last woman initiated into first blood in the old mother-worshipping way, and that she (and the world) cannot go back to the red tent home of life-celebrating childhood. The red tent of mothers' voices has become an Eden murdered by experience and in my view, she becomes the wandering womb, homeless because there is no home for women in a patriarchal world. When she is young, one of her mothers prophesies that Dinah is actually a river goddess, a symbol for a flow of life that rushes onward and cannot rest. As Dinah says of Egypt, "I had no place among all of these wonderful things, and yet, this was my only home" (220). Even with a home, adult women are homeless, because the more modern world does not have a red tent for gathering women's experiences and stories.

The last comment that I quoted from the group's response is "she just seems so isolated from everyone during the second part of the book." The alone quality of the protagonist emerges from contrast with the many chatting mothers and stories she registers before she leaves Jacob's tribe. Essentially, then, *The Red Tent* is not only about celebrating female community; it is also about growing up and leaving the world of mothers, the home, and childhood. Growing up is associated with violence, the novel suggests, and an increasing understanding of what it means to be isolated. This vision of growth fits with both the psychoanalytic understanding of child and adolescent development and the understanding of girls that I have interviewed before. Few of the girls that I have interviewed equate womanhood with marriage and motherhood; most, instead, feel that those things possibly await them far in the future after a well-established career. To compensate for the utter aloneness of womanhood, in their view, the girls often fantasize about living with roommates in an extended college setting like that imagined on the television

series *Friends*. Marriage, then, no longer has a meaning of what allows a girl to grow up and leave her family-of-origin; instead, it is a much-later possibility after the individuality of adulthood is well established.

The most painful sections of *The Red Tent* are when Dinah cannot tell her story in Egypt, the symbol for adulthood. She is only able to tell her story three times. First, she tells her painful past to a storyteller who once served Rebecca and has been raped and mutilated, now blind and wandering around with entertainers. The story of Werenro is a very serious image of the consequences of female independence—a hyperbole of the narrator’s homelessness—and it is crucial that she is introduced to us as a captivating storyteller, inherently a mobile, nomad, independent figure. Second, Dinah tells her tale to the midwife with whom she sojourns to the river valley. This midwife-companion functions as a minor “sisterhood,” but this midwife-companion facilitates Dinah’s marriage late in life and is thus more like a matchmaker. Third, Dinah finally tells her tale to her second husband, the book’s conclusion a suggestion of equality in a seasoned rather than young, passionate marriage.

Thus the structure of the novel moves from polygamous marriage to complete independence to monogamous marriage, as it simultaneously traces the structure of human development (Dinah’s movement from mothers to the world of men) and cultural development (matriarchal deities to the one God). The development is quite literal in that the novel moves from a world that worships the female body to one that worships the phallus, as speculated in Lacanian theory, and simultaneously demonstrates that the young protagonist’s subjectivity moves from one comprised of her mother’s stories to her own independent story to the end of her story in a mature, post-reproductive marriage. I guess you could say the second marriage is a “happy ever after,” or at least one girl thought so, and thus compensation for the loss of a woman’s world that accompanies growth. Yet the novel seems to actually recommend a marriage freed from reproductive role, mirroring today’s increasingly childless couples and late marriages.

The novel offers the thesis that a match made late in life, once having achieved wisewoman status, can be based on male-female equality. Dinah’s second husband respects her midwifery: “He took an exquisite little box from a niche in the wall. It was un-

adorned but perfect, made of ebony—wood that was used almost exclusively for the tombs of kings—and it had been burnished until it shone like a black moon. ‘For your midwife’s kit,’ he said, and held it out to me” (271). The book fits solidly in contemporary American visions of growing up, which is to leave the gendered separatism of childhood, connected with mothers, behind, make it on your own, and only then forge a partnership with “an other” that will be based on self-fulfillment, rather than reproductive role (Dinah can no longer reproduce). Perhaps this aspect of the girls’ appreciation interests me most. For, in *The Red Tent*, they have caught a glimpse of a bildungsroman across the entire life span; there is no end to development at 21, no “home-away-home” pattern common to myth, but a continual flow of development until death. The wandering womb thus explains a model of womanhood as *continual* development of self and community, a model that links the stages of these teen girl readers with what all women are going through all the time. In today’s world, the basic biological rhythms of the body may be the only ways that the lives of mothers and daughters resemble one another; the fantasy of the red tent and communities of women organized around childrearing is yesteryear. Dinah’s growth into a vocation thus mirrors what today’s girls imagine growing up to be; this model has its costs and benefits just like any other model. While there are limitations to girls imagining adulthood as marriage and motherhood, there are also limitations to viewing adulthood as being alone and believing marriage and childbearing only appropriate for mid-career women, as rather controversially argued by Sylvia Hewlett.

## Animism in Style

But the girls always point out “something about this novel” that captivates: “the way it was written . . . so passionate.” That something is style, which they are not as good at describing. Diamant’s strategy is to embed the symbolic level of literature in the concrete description of events. The metaphor is couched within the image in the sentence. She thus does not rely upon her reader to leap to the symbolic level, but concludes the meaning by positing a symbol in the everyday object, so the reader is always aware of two levels of meaning—the concrete story or plot itself and the

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walked in harmony (particularly centered on body experience), and when the world of the flesh and spirit were not at odds, but the flesh world fully symbolized and incarnated the symbolic. In an effort to enhance her fertility, for example, Rachel “dined upon snake—the animal that gives birth to itself, year after year” (47). The world of objects then represents

transcendent symbolic meaning. We see an example in the prologue: “Maybe you guessed that there was more to me than the voiceless cipher in the text. Maybe you heard it in the music of my name: the first vowel high and clear, as when a mother calls to her child at dusk; the second sound soft, for whispering secrets on pillows. Dee-nah” (1).

The sparse imagistic style of modernists such as Hemingway (which all the girls typically use as an example of an author they detest) has been left behind by many contemporary women writers, who prefer to unify the concrete and symbolic by unpacking the metaphor for the reader, which provides a fluid movement between story and symbol, an ease of bridging between literary levels. This is starkly opposed to a very common assertion among my interviewees that *The Old Man and the Sea* is simply bewildering (“what does the marlin mean?”). The style of *The Red Tent* furthers the thesis of the book: that there was a time when everyday life and the spirit world

human desire and spirit. This is a philosophy of an animated universe of myth, embodied then by the narrator’s zest for making symbols out of description.

Examples of this stylistic choice are numerous. The word “mantle” is both an object and a symbol in the sentence, “Leah wore the mantle of the great mother, seemingly always pregnant or nursing” (45). Bilhah’s “bracelet,” an object, becomes a link to Jacob in the following sentence: “Thinking of her bracelet, Bilhah smiled and with her forefinger traced the place where a bit of string had tied her to Jacob” (53). The moon is a symbol for the goddess because it has a literal role as an object in women’s lives: “Leah said the moon was the only face of the goddess that seemed open to her because of the way the moon called forth the filling and emptying of her body” (57). Above, I quoted “I am not certain whether my earliest memories are truly mine, because when I bring them to mind, I feel my mothers’ breath on every word” (75). Obviously, “breath” is both real and symbolic of their spirits, evocative of the breath of life. Expressions take on concrete and metaphoric meaning: “We ate a morning meal salted by the tears of those who would not accompany us” (102). The word “bowl” in the following sentence is both an image and a link to a childhood organized around food: “The hills in the distance held my life in a bowl filled with everything I could possibly want” (83). In “I recognized the scent of this water the way I knew the perfume of my mother’s body” (111), the perfume has a layer of resonance beyond just the scent of the maternal body. We see a double meaning in “rooted in one place” in the following: “After a few days of [travel], I could barely remember my old life, rooted in one place” (110). Diamant often states the action and then provides the metaphor in a clause: “My thoughts flew back and forth, like the shuttle on a great loom, so that when I finally heard my name in my mother’s mouth, there was some anger in it” (135). She uses the syntax to suggest double meanings; in the last sentence quoted, “it” could be the mother’s mouth or the name of Dinah, thus Diamant has created the anger as a symbol as well as an emotion of the moment, blurring the line between mother and daughter, speech and character.

In relative clauses, Diamant will draw out the significance of action: “We took advantage of our freedom, putting our feet into the water and pouring

out the handful of stories that compose the memory of childhood” (132), or “Silence greeted the declaration of this visitor [Werenro], who spoke in strange accents that bent every word in three places” (143). Occasionally Diamant will replace the real object with symbolic language: “I watched the preparations from the bottom of a dark well” (232), the well entirely psychological. Rather than simply reporting the fact that she tells her story to Werenro and leaving it to the reader to determine significance, the narrator states that, “Without hesitation, I told her everything. I leaned my head back, closed my eyes, and gave voice to my life” (255). The author uses various personifications to link levels of meaning:

Death was in the room. I caught sight of him in the shadows beneath a statue of Bes, the friendly-grotesque guardian of children, who seemed to grimace at his own powerlessness here. (240)

A snake slithered from the spot where her spittle fell, and I shivered in the cold blast of Werenro’s anger (254).

The strategy is to continually link the action with the plane of the sacred and to link the mortal and immortal world with one another, furthering the thesis of the book that women connect life and death: “In the red tent we knew that death was the shadow of birth, the price women pay for the honor of giving life” (48). Importantly, these various devices of the narrator’s storytelling are shared by Dinah’s second husband, who speaks in the same way. For example, he explains his preference for woodcarving over stone cutting: “I had no talent for stone. [. . .] Only wood understood my hands. Supple and warm and alive, wood speaks to me and tells me where to cut, how to shape it. I love my work, lady” (245). We know he is special because he deploys the narrator’s style.

This means of leading the reader to symbolic meaning from action is a very common strategy of ethnic women writers who want both academic and popular audiences. I recently completed an analysis of the way earthly and spiritual planes are linked by concrete and symbolic language in the works of writers Ntozake Shange, Ana Castillo, and Julia Alvarez (Blackford, “The Spirit of A People”); perhaps the best example of this strategy is Toni Morrison, an author whom many teen girls also like. In fact, they do not need me to link the language of Anita Diamant with Toni Morrison. One enthusiastic reader of *The*

*Red Tent* also proclaimed her enthusiasm for *Song of Solomon* and *The Bluest Eye*, while disparaging in the same breath Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* for its sparse style and refusal of larger-than-life myth.

## Conclusion: Teaching Novels of Female Development

The author most often embraced in the same vein as *The Red Tent* is Marion Zimmer Bradley, a very natural counterpart to feminist rewritings of legend and this particular style that unites plot and symbol, women’s history and body with spirituality and deity. Because the same kind of enthusiasm for female story is evident, I am quoting this discussion as well. One girl said she’s “into legends—especially Celtic and Druid.” The subject of Marion Zimmer Bradley quickly surfaced:

**Carol:** *The Mists of Avalon!* I love that book! I adore that book! My middle name is Morgana, and my Mom got it from Morgane in Authurian legend.

**Laticia:** I just love Authurian legend, because there’s so many different takes on it . . .

**Carol:** . . . my mother was obsessed with King Arthur, and so she named me after her. And all the books I’ve ever read have portrayed her as an evil person who wants to like kill Arthur or whatever. She’s always the evil sorceress, so I’m like “Mom! Way to name me after this evil chick!” It’s Morgan le Fey actually.

**Laticia:** It’s so many different names . . . Morgana, Morgane . . .

**Carol:** so then my mother goes “No, you have to read this book; this is the greatest book ever.”

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**. . . The style of *The Red Tent* furthers the thesis of the book: that there was a time when everyday life and the spirit world walked in harmony (particularly centered on body experience), and when the world of the flesh and spirit were not at odds, but the flesh world fully symbolized and incarnated the symbolic.**

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This is the mother-lode of all books, so I read it. I read it. And it's great. I adored it. It's so cool because it's kind of like "so that's where my name comes from."

**Laticia:** I've read every single version of like Arthurian legend, really that I can just find. And like I love mythology and legend, and I love when . . . I love how a lot of fantasy books that I read really get a lot of their roots and like themes, and even like names and just ideas from Celtic, Norse, or like English Arthurian legends and even Greek. Like I just . . . I really like that. I like the romance.

The girls filed *The Red Tent* in their heads with *The Mists of Avalon*, just like I had, seeing the significance of female points of view on old stories, which are critical points of view. I do not think it an accident that Bradley, also accessible and symbolic in her descriptions, is called "the mother-lode" of books and like Diamant's preface, contextualizes the female name ("Dee-nah," "Morgana"). In another interview with a much younger girl in a different region, I also found an enthusiastic reader of *The Mists of Avalon*; in this rare case, the book was actually read for class, with, in my view, a cutting-edge teacher.

*The Mists of Avalon* and *The Red Tent* are similar in the way they blend child development with cultural development, building nostalgia for a fantasy of being a daughter in a culture ruled by mothers, then marking the end of childhood by the need to leave the mothers behind and enter the world of the fathers. *The Red Tent* now takes its place with *The Mists of Avalon* and *The Bluest Eye* in my syllabus for literature of childhood, the class that I teach to prepare pre-service teachers in both children's and adolescent literature. The female novels are beloved among the female students and quite unfortunately alienate the male students (they never interrogate why everyone can equally love Robin Hood, King Arthur, *Harry Potter* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*). My students always observe (some happily and some not) how the female novels engage both the body and sexuality (and often rape/abuse) in very concrete ways. They often cannot imagine teaching these in high school; they fear the parents and prefer to ponder the meaning of the marlin. But at least by teaching a novel such as *The Red Tent*, I've encouraged them to expand the

scope of the adolescent novel in, I think, imaginative and mythic ways. And maybe some of them will be brave enough to bring this material into the classroom and give these wandering wombs another home for storytelling. It behooves us to pay attention to what teens are reading on their mothers' bookshelves, which is where I myself, after all, encountered my favorite teenage books such as the novels of Danielle Steele, William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which were much more important to me than what I read in school.

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