

Garments of Light

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English

Bar-Ilan University

Geula Geurts

332339092

Advisor: Dr. Marcela Sulak

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גאולה גרץ

332339092

מנחה: ד"ר מרסלה שולק

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Aims & General Description.....	4
Conceptual Background.....	5
Shape of Project.....	10
Bibliography.....	11

Introduction

I am a woman. I am also Jewish. It is these two aspects of my identity that brought me to Israel eight years ago, where I then embraced Orthodox Judaism. I made the Old City of Jerusalem, with her ancient cobbled streets and piously hatted men and wig-wearing women, my home. I breathed and dreamt religion, learning holy texts deep into the night, singing ancient poetry for prayer. As a good God-fearing woman following the laws of Jewish modesty, I covered myself from collarbone to elbow to knee. Covering up was a way of experiencing safety, hiding the skin that I believed, or was told to believe, so often had tempted men. I even kept the Jewish law of *negia* (touch), which prohibits physical contact between unmarried men and women. I was thrilled to find out that there was a law that forbade men from touching me.

When that naivety was shattered, and covering no longer provided me with safety, the gradual process of “undressing” began. Layer by layer, *tefach* (Jewish measurement the size of a handbreadth) by *tefach* I uncovered myself. This tension between covering and uncovering serves as the center of my thesis in creative writing. The work will seek to conceal while revealing, and reveal while concealing, all along searching for the spirit in the flesh, and the flesh in the spirit.

Aims and General Description

“The sexual life is usually enveloped in many layers,
for all of us— poets, writers, artists.
It is a *veiled* woman, half-dreamed.”
~~ Anaïs Nin, *Little Birds*.

This project – *Garments of Light* – will consist of a collection of poems that creatively re-examine the lives of women recorded in the Bible, such as Eve, Lilith, Rahav, Jezebel and Hannah, through the lens of my own past experience as a modest woman in the Jewish Orthodox world. Persona poems of biblical women will function as “veils” behind which the lyrical I can “reveal while concealing.” Prose-inflected poetry and lyrical essay fragments will allow the narrator to “conceal while revealing,” for they will take advantage of the truth-telling expectations we have for non-fiction prose, while subverting them. Litanies, sonnets, and odes, often adhering to rhythmic accentual verse, will form the more erotic and spiritual subject matters.

The project will be divided into three sections: Exhibitionist, Coverings, and Spirit & Flesh. Throughout each the tension between revealing and concealing will be examined, and the personal and the biblical will intertwine into one female voice of spiritual and sexual exploration. The poetry of this project can be seen as exhibitionistic in its confessional quality, yet will always seek to “strip” in a modest way, to search for the spirit that dwells in nudity, while reinterpreting Jewish religious narratives.

Conceptual Background

“A garden locked is my sister, my bride. A spring locked, a fountain sealed up.”
~~ *Song of Songs 4:12*

After God punished Adam and Eve for eating from the forbidden tree, and just before expelling them from the Garden, He “made garments of leather (“*kutnot or*”) for Adam and his wife, and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21). In the *Midrash Raba* on this passage, the first century sage Rabbi Meir substituted the phrase “*kutnot or*” (with the letter “*ayin*”) for the homonymic phrase (“*kutnot or*” with the letter “*alef*”), changing its meaning to “garments of light” (Bereshit Raba, 20). This counterintuitive interpretation of God dressing the till-then *naked* Adam and Eve in “garments of light” is surely strange, but it implies a deeper, even mystical understanding of the essence of covering.

I like this interpretation because it challenges the strict approach towards the covering that plays such a central role for women in Jewish law. In Orthodox Judaism, it is believed that one of the main purposes for the creation of woman was to bring modesty, or *tzniut*, into this world. According to *midrashic* commentary, Eve was purposely created from Adam’s rib – “a part of him that was concealed and internal” (Aiken, 131). “Modesty helps us find *the Godly spark* in ourselves and in others. The manner in which women dress, speak, and conduct themselves encourages this process” (Aiken, 138).

However, if, according to Rabbi Meir, God clothed Adam and Eve in “spiritual garments of light” instead of “garments of leather” as they exited Eden, nakedness or “*erva*” can take on a whole new meaning. This idea accepts the naked body in its purest form as a vessel for the spirit to shine through, even after Adam and Eve sinned and

became ashamed of their nakedness. This collection of poems is my examination of (un)covering, my attempt at finding the spirit within the naked flesh itself, and the search for my own “garments of light.”

For subject matter, I will mainly draw on Jewish texts that involve suppressed or sexual female characters and that expound on the concept and laws of Jewish modesty. In Psalms I find sayings like “All the glory of the King’s daughter is internal” (45:13) that support the image of the covered and modest woman. In the Bible men are instructed to wear *tzitzit* in order to remember the commands of the Lord, and not “prostitute” themselves by chasing after the lusts of their own hearts and eyes (Numbers 15:39). Yet, in Song of Songs I find spiritual eroticism that is celebrated with sayings like “My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him” (5:4). In the Talmud I find instances of rabbis visiting the most beautiful whores. I see female personae like Eve and her mythical counterpart Lilith as embodiments of female rebellion and sexual empowerment.

The purpose of using these biblical women and stories as subject matter isn’t merely to give a voice to these female characters. I will also use these women and narratives as a “veil” through which I can “undress” the lyrical I. By concealing the lyrical I as other Jewish female personae, my personal narrative of the “before, during and after” of being a modest, observant, Jewish woman can be revealed. In doing so, the lyrical I will constantly be moving between the voices of ancient Jewish women and the personal, which will create one unified female voice of spiritual and sexual exploration. The tension between covering and uncovering will therefore remain a thread throughout all the pieces.

My guides for this project are poets who are similarly driven by this tension, and who engage in this exploration of “poetic exhibitionism.” The Israeli poet Yona Wallach is known for her erotically charged work and leading the feminine revolution in Hebrew poetry. She often provocatively reveals her female sexuality through the trappings of the Hebrew language itself, which, she points out, is gender-obsessed and often grammatically negates the feminine.

In her controversial poem “Tefillin” Wallach uses the religious phylacteries – a set of small black leather boxes containing verses from the *Torah*, used by observant men during weekday morning prayers – as a sexual object. In the poem the female speaker lets a man bind her with the leather straps of the *tefillin*. On a deeper level, this aggressive sexual act communicates the woman’s supposed inferiority with regards to the religious commandment of *tefillin* from which, according to Jewish law, she is excluded. More so, Wallach ironically exhibits a vulgar sexual scene, against which the *tefillin* in its religious essence is meant to safeguard. Towards the end of the poem she has exhibited so much nudity that she forces the audience (the readers), whether religious or secular, to confront their own voyeurism, a tendency that lies deep within human nature: “Until I strangle you/Completely with the tefillin/That stretch the length of the stage/And into the astonished audience” (*Let the Words*, 92).

I am also guided by poets who are aware of the spiritual power of female sexuality, such as Audre Lorde. In her essay “The Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde praises spiritual female eroticism, and speaks of the erotic as a tool for self fulfilment and spiritual growth: “The erotic is...an *internal sense of satisfaction* to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth

of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves” (Lorde, 53). She also makes the important distinction between spiritual eroticism and “pornography and obscenity—the abuse of feeling” (Lorde, 59).

The poet Jill Alexander Essbaum similarly explores spirituality and sexuality in her collections *Harlot* and *Heaven*. She is aware of the internal shame that exists around nakedness in religion, as she notes in the poem “Epiphany”: “I am naked under the stars,/which means I am guilty of something” (*Heaven*, 17). Yet she playfully uses the biblical personae of Adam and Eve to indulge in her own erotic interpretations in such poems as “Evening”:

The woman—picture her
luscious and sly—cradles
the fruit in her breast
like the half-eaten head
of a lover. (*Heaven*, 2).

She also uses the story of Genesis to convey a personal narrative of a failed relationship in the poem “Oh Adam”: “Take that rib and shove it where it hasn’t seen./Your neck is fig-thistle, your groin, a could have been,/but wasn’t” (*Heaven*, 4).

I also turn to Israeli Talmud scholar Ruth Calderon for her humility and wisdom when it comes to taking the liberty of personally interpreting religious texts. In her short story collection *A Bride for One Night*, Calderon notes:

Sometimes I come across Talmudic stories that irritate or provoke me...
but when I confront them in learning, I opt not to stay angry and frustrated.
Rather, I try to find evidence of other voices that challenge the mainstream
and catch glimpses of rebelliousness and feminine empowerment.
(Calderon, xiv).

For poetic form I am firstly drawn to prose-inflected poetry, inspired by Eula Biss’ *The Balloonists*. Biss weaves a variety of source materials – like a hand guide of

carpenter's tools and research on the airplane's black box – with autobiographical prose poems. Michel Delville says of the prose poem: “Moving back and forth between lyrical, narrative, philosophical, and critical material, the prose poem can be seen as a part of a more general movement in contemporary literature toward the dissolution of the generic boundaries” (Finch, 266). This form is therefore at constant play between the more objective impression that (non-fictional) prose gives and the more subjective impression of poetry (with its line-breaks). This mixing of genres creates a hybrid form where objective sources are broken into poetic lines, disturbing what we expect from revelation and concealment.

I will similarly weave a variety of source materials, including autobiography, Biblical narrative, Talmudic interpretation and Jewish law into fragments of hybrid poems to maintain a sense of revelation through concealment.

For the poems centered on erotic exploration I am drawn to the rhythmic quality of accentual verse. Fussel, in *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, writes: “the effect of poetic rhythm is distinctly physiological and perhaps *sexual*.” He tunes in on the rhythmic energy of accentual verse, and explains that “with every beat of the meter a tide of anticipation in us turns and swells” (Fussel, 5). My poetry will attempt to be as rhythmic as possible to create the swelling anticipation of the erotic subject matter.

For this same reason I am also drawn to the poetic genre of the litany, which is “an incantatory recitation built on a simple pattern: every line, or nearly every line, starts with the same word” (Finch, 242). Like accentual verse, the anaphora (repetition of words) creates a sexual tide of anticipation. It also functions as a form of meditative prayer, with its spellbinding mood, which ties to the biblical and liturgical origin of the

form. I will therefore often use the litany for both erotic *and* spiritual subject matters, as its form allows for the fusion of the meditative spirit and the rhythmic body.

Shape of the Project

“Garments of Light” will be divided into three sections: “Exhibitionist,” “Coverings,” and “Spirit & Flesh.” Each section will explore its own aspect of the tension between physical and autobiographical revelation and concealment through halakhic laws of modesty and female biblical personae.

The “Exhibitionist” section weaves the autobiography of the lyric I with Jewish modesty laws found in the *Shulachan Aruch, Even Haezer, Talmud* and *Torah* itself, and the stories of female biblical characters. These texts and Biblical stories will provide the narrative a subtle sense of covering, however in this section “poetic exhibitionism” is central. The lyric I “undresses” by telling her story.

In the second section, “Coverings,” the lyric I retreats from (over) exposing herself, and “covers” the personal narrative by channeling female biblical characters in the form of persona poems, litanies and odes. The focus in this section will be a reinterpretation of the biblical, yet the voice of the lyric I will coincide with the voice heard in “Exhibitionist.”

In “Spirit & Flesh,” the third section, the lyric I finds a balance between covering and uncovering. The poems (litanies, odes and sonnets) will be centered on spiritual female eroticism wherein the lyric I experiences a synthesis of spirit and flesh, accepts her journey and comes close to finding her own “garments of light”.

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