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The Essential but Forgotten Woman: A Feminist Reading of Chaim Potok's My Name is Asher Lev

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A Feminist Reading of Chaim Potok’s 
*My Name is Asher Lev*

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In 1972, Chaim Potok liberated the Jewish artist in his novel *My Name is Asher Lev*. He questioned the inerrancy of Jewish tradition, shaking but not destroying the solidity of Jewish orthodoxy with one man’s assertion of individuality and artistic expression. Potok’s own definition of the text as a novel “about a conflict of aesthetics” (Forbes 17) coupled with “the bias” of Asher’s narrative voice (Del Fattore 56) guides most readers and critics to focus on the novel as a cultural conflict between the Judaism of a father and the artistry of a son. But this angle sees only part of the text, focusing on a male power struggle and setting woman aside, ultimately making her the backdrop for a male-driven plot and an arena for the analysis of a male battle. Asher’s early narrative defines the book as
“a long session in demythology” (Potok 9), but even as the myth of the Jewish artist crumbles and dissolves, the myth of the woman remains; Asher Lev moves to a place of his own vision and action, but Rivkeh Lev stagnates in a place as object, subject to a vision and action imposed by men. The “demythology” is only a partial one without the insight of a feminist critique: a vision “to reconstruct the female experience, ‘the buried and neglected female past,’ to fill in the blank pages and make the silences speak” (Greene 13). A feminist reading will expose and critique the place assigned to Rivkeh Lev, completing the task of “myth decipherer” as it draws woman into the foreground and considers the role of the female sufferer within Potok’s construction of male conflict (Greene 5).

Feminist criticism uses Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia, adding another voice – the female voice – to the possibilities of literary interpretation. As one feminist critic points out, “[a]lternative foci of critical attentiveness will render alternative readings or interpretations of the same [text]” (Kolodny 250). In My Name is Asher Lev, a readjustment of critical focus away from the differences between father and son opens up the novel as a story about the discrepancy between male and female.

While Potok does place a wall of differences between Asher and Aryeh Lev – Judaism versus art, tradition versus individuality, and morality versus aesthetics – the father and son connect at significant points of similarity. Potok introduces this complexity in the very beginning of
the novel. Asher rattles off a list of accusations against himself—“I am a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflic-
tor of shame upon my family, my friends, my people” (Potok 9) – and immediately acknowledges both their truth and falsity: “I am none of those things. . . . I am indeed, in some way, all of those things” (Potok 9). Asher identifies himself both as a follower and dissenter of Jewish tradition and, as such, both a follower and dissenter of his fa-
ther. Thus, the incompatibility of father and son can be read, not necessarily as core differences but as different expressions of the same basic feature: their maleness. Though they battle each other on almost everything, father and son are joined at the core as men fulfilling their uniquely male roles as followers of tradition, cultural creators, and Jewish leaders.

Both Asher and Aryeh become dedicated students of tradition. Their choice of tradition places them in dif-
ferent camps of thought, but their commitment to tradition creates the same absolute surrender, which William Purcell labels compulsivity: “[Aryeh] is driven by a compulsive need to travel – no less compulsive than Asher’s need to draw – building yeshivas and working to spread his par-
ticular brand of Hasidism” (78). Tradition seeps into their being, defining their lives and filling them with a need to follow the men who have gone before. Aryeh returns to Russia, embracing the lineage of his father and grandfa-
thor by fulfilling his destiny “to bring the Master of the Universe into the world” (Potok 11). Asher returns to the
museum again and again, entering into the lineage of great artists— "Chagall . . . Picasso . . . Asher Lev" (Potok 35)— as part of "a tradition . . . [with] every important artist who ever lived" (Potok 289). Each man understands himself as part of something larger, using tradition to embody his own image of the ideal man. To modify Sanford Pinsker's critique, "the claims of [manhood on their] talent" commit Asher and Aryeh to the paths defined by men before them (42).

Tradition makes up the framework in which Asher and Aryeh cultivate their talents; and in their unique work, both men emerge as profound cultural creators; Asher's art pervades the novel as the obvious aesthetic, and more abstrusely Aryeh's "commitment to saving people [emerges] as [his own] form of aesthetics. . . . 'saving people' being equivalent to an appreciation of the beautiful" (Abramson 77). Though it might be tempting to differentiate between Asher as the real artistic creator and Aryeh as only a Jewish sustainer, Purcell notes the "creative force" of each: "Asher Lev, in turn by becoming a part of the established tradition of Western art while remaining committed to his Hasidic faith, takes up the challenge of becoming for Jewish art the type of creative force that his father and forefathers have been in the propagation of Hasidic learning" (79). As creators, Aryeh continues the cultivation of Jewish thought and saves Jewish lives while Asher develops a whole new expression of Jewish thought and life; they both engage their unique capabilities to fulfill the male role of cultural creator.

Finally, father and son project their similarities most
tellingly through their identification as important Jewish leaders. Aryeh is a renowned and beloved leader not only within his Brooklyn community but also within the worldwide Jewish community, as a man who has saved hundreds of Jewish lives in his call “to find people in need and to comfort and help them” (Potok 10). Although he experiences rejection and disconnection from his Jewish community, Asher understands the same call on his life and infuses his art with the same purpose adopted by his father: to “bring life to all the wide and tired world” (Potok 39). Both feel their duty to renew life, but as Asher explains, “My father worked for Torah. I worked for . . . a truth I did not know how to put into words” (Potok 264); his father’s leadership is understood and accepted while his is misinterpreted and rejected, developing only as his own self-definition. However, as Ellen Serlen Uffen writes, “It is in the very process of becoming an established part of the alien tradition of art that we see [Asher] becoming at last his father’s son and the inheritor of Jewish tradition” (174). Aryeh accepts Jewish orthodoxy and Asher redefines Jewish orthodoxy, but both assume male authority in their faith.

Clearly, male commitment connects Asher and Aryeh, and together they embody distinctly male roles; through acceptance or dissension, tradition or novelty, Potok’s men thrive in their purpose, controlling the action and direction of the novel. Against this background of male dominance and success, Rivkeh Lev emerges as the
female sufferer. She aligns herself with her own unique system of tradition and novelty, carving out her own strengths but submitting them to the male structure and becoming the novel's image of sacrifice, the essential character who powerfully affects the individual successes of both her husband and son but at the same time never realizes a life of her own. Not a fundamentally weak individual by any means, Rivkeh offers intellectual, religious, and emotional strength, but the text limits this strength, restricting her as the female canvas on which to draw this male conflict. An understanding of her place reflects the novel's disparity between male and female, subject and object, power and the reflection of power.

The novel confines Rivkeh Lev to the place of sister, wife, and mother, defining her in relationship to men and developing her primarily in the context of such relationships. In the happy, uncomplicated years, Asher playfully describes Rivkeh as "a gentle big sister" (Potok 12), but with the sudden death of her brother, she loses her playfulness and gentility, becoming a "skeletal" figure with "eyes [like] dark dead pools" (Potok 21). For weeks she wallows in her brother's death, taking on his suffering and literally feeling it through her own physical and mental decay; she lingers in a kind of living death until one conviction brings her fully back to life: "I want to finish my brother's work" (Potok 49). She chooses to take her brother's place and enter the academy, but rather than an act of female self-assertion in a male-dominated world, her
choice is simply a reflection of her brother. She survives her profound suffering by taking on her brother’s identity, sustaining his life and saving her own by completing his work. Although Rivkeh uses her brother’s work to reaffirm and direct her life away from a literal death, one can argue that she embraces a kind of figurative death by suppressing her needs to complete her brother’s objective.

This sisterly sacrifice also extends to her roles as wife and mother. Both Asher and Aryeh survive on Rivkeh’s sacrifice, forcing her to choose between the two; Aryeh regains his strength in Europe only when Rivkeh leaves her son to join him, and likewise Asher thrives as an artist largely through his mother’s commitment to the purchase of materials and trips to the museum, despite her husband’s warnings. They can fulfill their male roles only through her commitment to what they see as irreconcilable work but what is actually the same work: male work. Uffen writes, “[Rivkeh’s] special dilemma . . . is her understanding of the needs of both her husband and son and her sympathy with both” (175), but this description glosses over the real dilemma: understanding herself in the context of her sympathy for them.

Rivkeh’s commitment to the success of male work defines her character, limiting her development to the conflict she experiences between husband and son. Joan Del Fattore suggests a glimmer of Rivkeh as an active character when she writes, “Once Rivkeh begins her academic career, her work is . . . entirely in accord with her
principles. Her scholarship thus becomes her own” (55). But her devotion to academic work seems to affirm her restricted ambitions rather than reveal her self-directed career; Asher’s narrative describes Rivkeh’s work as an extension or at best a part of the more predominant male pursuits:

My mother had begun the preparations for her journey. She purchased clothes. She shipped part of her library to an address in Vienna. She rented our apartment to a family that had recently arrived from Russia. She attended meetings with the Rebbe’s staff. She defended her dissertation and received her doctorate. She seemed filled with a new energy. She did everything quickly, radiantly. Sometimes I would hear her singing to herself. She seemed fulfilled. (Potok 234-35)

By Asher’s own connections, Rivkeh’s academic fulfillment does not come inherently with her studies but with her chance to apply those studies to her husband’s work.

Asher does acknowledge and even lament the trap he has helped construct around his mother:

She had kept the gift alive during the dead years; and she had kept herself alive by picking up her dead brother’s work and had kept my father alive by enabling him to resume his journeys. Trapped between two realms of meaning, she had straddled both realms, quietly
feeding and nourishing them both, and herself as well. (Potok 309)

But the irony of Asher's epiphany is unavoidable; he both acknowledges her essential part in his and his father's success and denies her an identity of her own. He images her as a kind of puppet in a system of male dominance, balancing between men but never achieving her own place. His words imply that she exists devoid of her own meaning – a third meaning – and lives only by "feeding and nourishing them." The whole Lev family undoubtedly suffers, but Rivkeh is the chosen sacrifice; she is the one left "waiting endlessly" in submission to a male-governed world that moves on and develops without her (Potok 309).

Asher and Aryeh both exercise their active freedom, purposefully moving through the novel, but while Asher progresses in his journey as an artist and Aryeh projects Jewish influence in the world, Rivkeh stays in her place as the dutiful supporter of her men. What Asher's narrative praises as her dependability, dedication, and nourishment can be read, perhaps more fully, as her trapped identity; she is stuck playing the part of the objectified wife and mother, "woman-as-sign" (Kolodny 250). The men act while the woman is acted upon; they are creator-artists while she is a created image, a profound symbol in Asher's art.

It is important to consider Asher's understanding of his mother because, as the narrative voice, his view of Rivkeh tends to mold the reader's view of Rivkeh. After
the early playful years, his relationship with his mother is defined predominantly by how he uses her image in his art. Asher's first reference to his mother describes her as a drawing, a tangible still frame of her life juxtaposed against his own movement: "I remember drawing my mother . . . I remember my first drawings of my mother's face" (Potok 12). He remembers her, first and foremost, as a subject for his pictures, a part of his artistic progression, an image he has studied with an artist's eye. As his artistry develops, embracing his street, the Hasidic community, and beyond, Asher returns on several occasions to the image of his mother in his art. At times, he stares at her gazing out the living room window, but he glosses over her identity as his mother, preferring to define her as artistic subject matter: "I looked at her, holding the picture of her in my mind. I closed my eyes and, starting with the top of her forehead, began to draw her from memory inside my head . . . I had the lines of her face and body fixed in my mind . . ." (Potok 140). His mother's form follows him when he travels to Europe, and he finds himself superimposing her face upon other drawings of an elderly woman and the Pietà: "The next day on the swiftly moving train to Rome, I drew the Pietà from memory, and discovered that the woman supporting the twisted arm of the crucified Jesus bore a faint resemblance to my mother" (Potok 299). This progression climaxes in the Brooklyn Crucifixion, Asher's greatest artistic creation in the novel. He uses the whole family in this painting, but while Asher and Aryeh appear to retain
their individual identities, Rivkeh becomes largely the embodiment of human suffering. While he recognizes his obligation to and affection for his mother, Asher cannot seem to separate her life from his art. He sees her best through his art.

The motif of sight—the disparate vision of the characters—reinforces their roles. Asher and Aryeh employ vision as a vital component in their lives; what they see and how they see determines their work and eventual success. Father and son each despise the other’s vision, dismissing the other’s kind of sight or referring to it in negative terms:

‘I respect you, Papa. But I can’t respect your aesthetic blindness.’
‘Aesthetic blindness? Do you hear, Rivkeh? Aesthetic blindness.’ My mother looked slowly from my father to me, then back to my father.
‘An interesting concept. Aesthetic blindness. And what about moral blindness, Asher?’
(Potok 289-90)

But at least in one sense, their profound disagreement can be read as different surface expressions of the same understanding: “To touch a person’s heart, you must see a person’s face” (Potok 113). These words from Aryeh justify the moral vision fueling his work with Judaism, but they also justify Asher’s work as an artist. Asher’s vision to “see a person’s face” brings him fully into the world of art: “[S]omething was happening to my eyes. I looked at
my father and saw lines and planes I had never seen before. I could feel with my eyes” (Potok 105). These men both have active vision that determines their interaction with the world, but Rivkeh’s eyes are stripped bare of this sight.

In a short essay about female filmmakers, Viviane Forrester writes:

We don’t know what women’s vision is. What do women’s eyes see? How do they carve, invent, decipher the world? . . . I only know what men’s eyes see . . . Women’s vision is what is lacking and this lack not only creates a vacuum but it perverts, alters, annuls every statement. (56-57)

These words and questions describe the textual contrast between male sight and Rivkeh’s role as reflector. While Asher and Aryeh have fixed their gaze on the world, Rivkeh’s eyes wander between father and son, clinging to them. She does not participate in their philosophical debate over the superiority of aesthetic sight or moral sight because her vision focuses only on these men. Just as her work does not go beyond her men, her sight does not go beyond them. She spends hours staring out the front window, waiting anxiously for her husband, her son, and even her deceased brother to return home; there she becomes a still, lifeless form, putting her life on hold to wait for one glimpse of the men returning home. They have the power to return, but she has the power only to wait. When Asher
returns home late one night, Rivkeh puts her emotion into words: “What are you doing to me, Asher? . . . I don’t understand. What did I do to you? Tell me, what did I do to you? . . . Didn’t you realize someone was at home waiting? Didn’t it occur to you what it means to wait?” (Potok 83). She recognizes the injustice and the gap between their movement and her fixedness, their sight and hers, but her movement towards justice stops short, ending in “silence” and allowing both her husband and son to ignore the gap (Potok 83). She cannot “carve, invent, decipher the world” beyond what the male culture has set aside for her, so she stays at the window, waiting for her men.

In the final analysis, it is not simply a matter of male strength and female weakness. Rivkeh does exert her own strength in the text; she is allotted unique entrance into male scholarship and becomes a talented contributor to the work of both her husband and son. What is more important is the direction and movement of the characters’ strengths. As narrator, Asher falls into the controlling pattern of the literary tradition with its focus on male power and development, but a consideration of this limiting perspective and a shift towards a “woman-centered analysis” (Greene 14) can break this pattern and expose the woman hidden within the text. As Annette Kolodny writes, readers need to focus on two essential critical traits:

an acute and impassioned attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our
literary inheritance; the consequences of that encoding for women – as characters, as readers, and as writers; and with that, a shared analytic concern for the implications of that encoding not only for a better understanding of the past, but also for an improved reordering of the present and future as well. (252)

Only when critics expose this unconsidered disparity between women and men and challenge literary perpetuation of gender roles as natural, can the movement towards “a better understanding” and “improved reordering” begin.
Works Cited


