

**Creations, Names, and Life: Humanity and Femininity in the Female Golem Myth**

by

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# Creations, Names, and Life: Humanity and Femininity in the Female Golem Myth

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The subtle hierarchy which dictates who is granted and denied cultural authority is rarely more evident than when examining folklore through which “we can see all the shimmering, shadowy uncertainties of the world.”<sup>1</sup> The myth of the Golem, a clay being in Jewish folklore, provides an ideal opportunity for engaging with the default equation of humanity and masculinity, an assumption present in most Golem stories. My research attempts to disrupt this hierarchy that places women as lesser and the human as superior by examining the recuperated figure of the female Golem. I interrogate intersections of the constructed categories of “female” and “human” in Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* and in Alice Hoffman's *The World That We Knew* by tracing the complex literary history of the female Golem, focusing on the misogynistic myth of the female Golem attributed to Solomon ibn Gabirol. Through elaboration upon the feminist critiques advanced by Hoffman and Wecker, I highlight the glimpses of post-humanist thought achieved by each author's feminist revision of the female Golem, investigating the way certain humanist ideas remain and limit each novel's feminist project. By drawing on post-humanist philosophy and feminist and Jewish feminist literary criticism to consider these novels, I ultimately propose the necessity of post-humanist thought to the success of feminist interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> Frischer, Rita Berman. "Jane Yolen." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 27 February 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on April 20, 2021) <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/yolen-jane>>.

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## Preface

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## 1.0 Introduction

“Of all things, human is the measure”—Protagoras<sup>2</sup>

“If being recognized as human offers no reprieve from ontologizing dominance and violence, then what might we gain from the rupture of ‘the human’?”—Zakkiyah Imam Jackson<sup>3</sup>

“It wasn’t a person, Dad, I think it’s a woman!” does not merely represent a joke from a 1970s anime<sup>4</sup> but reveals a startlingly apt insight about the enduring conception of women as less than human or not quite human. This default equation of “human” and “male” is an assumption present in most Golem stories. The clay being created by man to protect Jews from persecution is most often fashioned as a male body, affirming the traditional association of physical strength with masculinity. The rare examples of female Golems in traditional stories similarly conform to patriarchal gender norms, such as the female Golems of Solomon ibn Gabirol, Ludwig Achim von Arnim, and even *Frankenstein*. However, two recent novels—Helene Wecker’s *The Golem and the Jinni* and Alice Hoffman’s *The World That We Knew*—use female Golems to advance feminist examinations of patriarchal society. In this thesis, I conduct critical case-studies of *The World That We Knew* and *The Golem and the Jinni*, which both contain modern renditions of the female Golem. I explore how Hoffman and Wecker adapt the traditionally misogynistic female Golem tale for differing feminist ends. Wecker’s modernization of the female Golem grants her individuality and a level of autonomy that subverts the idealized image of female subservience.

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<sup>2</sup> Boyarin, Daniel. *Socrates & the Fat Rabbis*. Chicago, U of Chicago P, 2009, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, Zakkiyah Iman. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. NYU Press: New York, 2020, 20.

<sup>4</sup> For the full episode, see "A Woman Who Burns like Paper." *Captain Harlock*, season 1, episode 3.

More influenced by the contemporary political arena and Donald Trump's rise to power in 2016, Hoffman's promotes a vision of feminist solidarity that crosses social and even species barriers (Manne 103). Hoffman offers a revisionist take on the Golem myth in which shared female power of whatever ontological status defeats the sexism of society. At the same time, these two authors' feminist strides step up to but do not cross the line that separates humans from other living beings.

The historical link between humanism, patriarchy, and white supremacy is something explored by many posthumanists. Masculinity and humanity are indeed so implicitly equated in the perception of the human, that women are automatically seen as less human than men. Critic Fiona Probyn-Rapsey explains that women are not only seen as less than human, but that "'women' have not been at the center of any *conception* of the human" (Probyn-Rapsey 54; my emphasis). The glorification of the human under humanism is thus more properly to be understood as the glorification of men and the legitimation of patriarchy. This means the domination of humanistic thought creates an illusion of inclusivity of universalism for all; however, it is the "histories and structures of power that determine who gets to claim to be universal, to speak on behalf of all" (Probyn-Rapsey 54). This insight extends to an understanding of race. Zakkiyah Iman Jackson argues, for instance, "that the production of the 'civilized' subject of sex/gender" (12) places the black female body at the opposite end "of a developmental model of 'universal humanity'" (14) and constructs the black woman as the threshold between "the human" and "the animal." Power dynamics of race and ethnicity thus operate as an imperative category for deciding who is excluded from the notion of the human, for non-white men are automatically considered less human, especially considering that colonization has only exacerbated and relied upon these racialized and sexualized modes of being from the Western Enlightenment which "posits the power of reason as its distinctive characteristic and humanistic universalism as its particularity" (Braidotti 23).



Imperialism has thus created a hierarchy where “[c]olonized people are also historically and culturally cast at the margins of human communities and also on the margins of Eurocentric definitions of the human” (Probyn-Rapsey 55).

Whiteness and maleness consequently characterize the collective definition of the human. Similarly, posthumanist scholar Rosi Braidotti argues that humanism and Enlightenment thinking is founded on the exclusive, Eurocentric category of the “human” which is founded on “a masculine standard of Sameness” (Braidotti 24). By definition, if patriarchy operates on this “standard of Sameness,” then women are on a level of Difference. Thus, there is an inherently strict hierarchy within a humanist framework which elevates men above women, whites above nonwhites, and humans above nonhumans. Therefore, while humanism posits that it is universal, it is based on an in-group and out-group false dichotomy that assumes “the notion of difference as pejoration” (Braidotti 23). White patriarchy and humanism are thus fundamentally linked, and each bolsters the domination of the other.

By the same token, Braidotti argues that recent feminisms are necessarily posthumanist. Braidotti’s “Four Theses of Posthuman Feminism” seeks not only to contextualize the intersection between posthumanism and feminism, but to argue that feminism must be posthumanist in order to have true equality. Braidotti supports this argument in her first section “Feminism is *not* a Humanism” by describing how the ‘human’ has always meant someone “masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit, and a full citizen of a recognized polity” (Braidotti 23). Braidotti further explains how this construct Others—women and minoritized people, making it necessary to move past this racist and sexist ideology for a truly equitable world for all life. Thus, she writes that “[t]here is no question that contemporary feminist theory is productively post-human” (Braidotti 33). This is mainly because

posthumanist thinkers “attempt to disengage from the dominant institutions and representations of femininity and masculinity, also known as the gender system” (Braidotti 21; 30). Therefore, posthumanism and feminism are analogous, and both are ideally post-gender.

For posthuman feminist interventions, it is necessary to problematize the human-animal binary. Firstly, it endorses a hierarchy where animal is constantly lesser to human. The “human” is thus defined by opposition, for “Liberal humanism’s basic unit of analysis, ‘Man’, produces an untenable dichotomy—‘the human’ versus ‘the animal’” (Jackson 12). This Othering appears to rest on a distinction between the sentience of humans and the lesser consciousness of non-human animals. However, this distinction is based on specifically human measures of intelligence, awareness, and self-awareness. Moreover, this distinction is based on the Western patriarchal version of “the human.” The standard of intelligence privileges western, Eurocentric thought and derives the more important notion of personhood from those standards in ways that discount other cultures and ways of living that are structured by the history of European colonization and economic exploitation. Thus, part of challenging the human-animal binary is also disrupting the sentient-not-sentient fallacy. Posthumanists have challenged this by declaring that if a being exists, they can develop sentience through a process of “becoming” (Braidotti 37). A more nuanced “human-nonhuman continuum” would also flatten the humanist hierarchy and decenter the European Enlightenment categories that Other “humans whose humanity is a subject of controversy, debate, and dissension,” those who Jackson calls “black(ened) people” (16).

With the strong tie between humanism and patriarchy, it is unsurprising that women and racial minorities are continually linked with animals in the artificial human-animal binary. Since men are seen as the archetype of the human, “human-nonhuman divide is entwined and correlated with long-standing interrelated Cartesian hierarchical dualisms of man versus woman, culture

versus nature, reason versus emotion, mind versus body, and West versus non-West in Western epistemologies” (Deckha 282). Braidotti suggests how these false dichotomies function together, such as how the culture versus nature discourse often acts as coded language where nature and animal become linked with women and minorities (Braidotti 28).

One strategy to resist patriarchal constructions of femininity is to rupture the category of “woman.” As a non-human or not quite human figure, the Golem also has the potential to break through the sex, gender, and race binaries that are entailed in anthropocentrism. Since the Golem is not a biological but an artificial being, and thus is not fully biologically female, she disrupts traditional thinking that often automatically links sex with gender. Additionally, since we follow the Golem’s journey from her “birth” to her “death,” it is more obvious how gender roles of “becoming-woman,” to borrow Braidotti’s language, are foisted on female Golems in order for them to conform with societal expectations of how women are force to act and to be. In other words, the Golem as a posthumanist figure casts some common assumptions about gender and women’s being in high relief, forcing us to challenge previous conceptions about gender and sexuality.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to transmit sound posthumanist theory to reality, as even though it would seem that posthumanist and postanthropocentric conceptions would eliminate these racial and sexual differences linked to humanist thought, “discriminatory differences are more strongly in place than ever, though they have shifted significantly” (36). As Braidotti succinctly remarked, “one is always already sexed,” meaning that posthumanist feminism recognizes the power of gendered expectations in humanist and posthumanist settings (37). Thus, even authors who attempt to write post-gender neuter Golems, such as Terry Pratchett in *Feet of Clay* and *Going Postal*, often unintentionally create masculine Golems anyway. Nevertheless,

when analyzing Hoffman and Wecker's female Golems, it is important to remember the power of gender and racial biases; the female Golem, like women, are already sexed, and since they are deemed Golems and not humans, they are also racialized to an extent as another species; thus, it is important to remember that often posthumanist ideals, regrettably, have not transitioned smoothly in mass-market fiction.

It is consequently apt for both Hoffman and Wecker to utilize their female Golems as vehicles for exploring and critiquing patriarchal structures. Wecker frames patriarchal institutions as antithetical to the necessary freedom and equality of her female Golem in *The Golem and the Jinni*, whereas Hoffman's World War II setting in *The World That We Knew* presents members of the Nazi party as insidiously evil precisely because of their pernicious anti-Semitism and misogyny, rendering her female protagonists' resistance a fight against patriarchal and anti-Semitic structures. This is their feminist project. In their feminist interventions in the Golem tradition, both authors also discover post-humanist insights regarding the connection between traditionally male-centered conceptions of human-being and sexist views of women. Wecker and Hoffman also localize the generalized subordination of women in Jewish history and culture in order to mine the feminist and posthumanist potential of a Jewish mythological figure as an antidote to the dominance of the de facto Christian worldview. The female Golem therefore effectively calls the position of women within a patriarchal worldview into question. In this thesis, I will elaborate upon the feminist critiques advanced by Alice Hoffman's *The World that We Knew* and Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* and highlight the glimpses of post-humanist thought achieved by each author's feminist revision of the female Golem, examining the way certain humanist ideas remain and limit each novel's feminist project.

## 2.0 The Literary History of the Female Golem

Historically, in most Golem stories, the Golem is male. It is important to specifically distinguish between the female Golem's sex and her gender. All female Golems are anatomically sexed; however, what I am investigating is their gender and how their femininity is culturally constructed<sup>5</sup>. The few stories that feature a female Golem objectify her, using her powerlessness as a tool to create a male fantasy, shedding light on how anxieties about women's autonomy leads to a clear distancing of the female from the human. In Ludwig Achim von Arnim's 1812 novel *Isabella von Aegypten*, he "...features the Golem as an estranged bride filled with 'Hochmut, Wollust, und Geiz' (pride, lewdness, and parsimony)," thereby fulfilling various misogynistic stereotypes (Dekel 243). In the article "How the Golem Came to Prague," Edan Deckel and David Gurley concur with popular opinion to interpret "Arnim's sexually charged Golem Bella as a critique of Romantic desire, a testimony to the legend's departure from rabbinic quarters" (Dekel 243). It is important to note that whenever male Golems are featured in stories, they are not written to represent all men. In fact, stories emphasize the distinction between human beings who are sexed male and Golems who are fashioned on the form of the male body. However, I will demonstrate that Arnim's female Golem is not an exception to the general characterization of femininity, occupying a position among a cluster of early golem texts that work in this manner; early female Golems are written to encompass all roles and duties that male authors assume women should have. Their multiple roles as sex objects and domestic servants demonstrate how the line

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<sup>5</sup> For scholarship which considers the construction of the female Golem and creature gender identity in Terry Pratchett's Discworld series, see Held, Jacob M. "A Golem Is Not Born, but Rather Becomes, a Woman: Gender on the Disc." Edited by James South. *Academia*.

between female golems and women is blurred. When explaining some of her motivations to write *The World That We Knew*, Alice Hoffman states that it is not unreasonable given the patterns that emerge within Golem literature to declare that historically “[m]ost Golems in literature are males, created by males, to serve as protectors and fighters for a community or a people, with a few exceptions of female Golems that are created for selfish reasons, either for sex or to be housemaids” (Hoffman 380).

For instance, *Frankenstein*, likely influenced by Golem stories<sup>6</sup>, presents an interesting perspective on women as well. The creature’s, or Golem’s, desire to have a female companion and Frankenstein’s subsequent fear of her presents the question: why was Frankenstein more afraid of a female Golem than the male Golem which he had already created? Anne K. Mellor argues that this fear represents the true patriarchal horror of “[a] woman who is sexually liberated, free to choose her own life, her own sexual partner (by force, if necessary)...for she defies the sexist aesthetic that insists that women be small, delicate, modest, passive, and sexually pleasing—but available only to their lawful husbands” (Mellor 279). The possibility of such a female Golem in Shelley’s novel raises the specter of a Golem who is more like the traditional male Golem. Frankenstein’s refusal affirms the fear of strong females, which is “...endemic to a patriarchal construction of gender” (Mellor 279). Unlike the subservient female Golems of other stories, in its hypothetical female Golem, what is horrific in *Frankenstein* is the image of non-human woman<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the connection between the Golem myth and *Frankenstein*, see Davidson, Jane P. “Golem — Frankenstein — Golem of Your Own.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 7, no. 2/3 (26/27), 1995, pp. 228–243. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/43308244](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308244). Accessed 17 Nov. 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The fear of female Golems easily aligns with a plethora of Monster Theory scholarship on the monstrous feminine; see Creed, Barbara. “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection.” *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 2020, pp. 211-26.

whose superhuman power is constructed as a threat to human society through her reproduction. Perhaps this is the central reason why Frankenstein decides not to complete her creation.

The scene in *Frankenstein* where Victor destroys the body of his female creature is reminiscent of one of the most prominent stories of the female Golem, which is attributed to Solomon ibn Gabirol, a Spanish poet and philosopher of the eleventh century. Folklorist Nathan Ausubel explains that “Gabirol, create[d] a maid-servant Golem. When the king heard of it he wished to put the Jewish poet<sup>8</sup> to death for practicing black magic, but Gabirol demonstrated to the King’s royal satisfaction that the creature he made was not human, and forthwith he returned her to dust<sup>9</sup>” (Ausubel 604). It is implied that Gabirol created the maid-servant in order to have a subservient female slave, as she did not possess the physical, financial, or social power to resist him. Similar to the story of Pygmalion, women are created by men and made the literal objects of men, illustrating how mythological ideals reflect gender roles. The king’s anger at Gabirol subtly implies that Gabirol wanted the Golem for sexual purposes, as the king’s rage seems extreme regarding a woman simply tidying up a house. This could perhaps be attributed to the seriousness of black magic accusations. However, Gabirol clearly practices some form of magic in order to turn the Golem back to dust. Therefore, it is evident that the king was not in reality concerned with the black magic, but instead with the status of this female Golem.

It is worth noting that the Golem is not destroyed because of any harm that she has brought, but simply because she was deemed no longer useful. It was also to the advantage of Gabirol to destroy the female Golem, for Gabirol himself was being threatened with death by the king. While

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that Gabirol is a poet, since the use of language and letter symbols is closely interwoven with the creation of the Golem.

<sup>9</sup> For further evidence of this female Golem myth, see Baer, Elizabeth R. *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2012, p. 20.

the power dynamic between golem and creator is always uneven, the issue is rather that when male golems are destroyed it is because they have served their purpose or have gotten out of control. In this instance, the female golem is destroyed precisely in order to prove she isn't human, which reiterates how the female golem's usage by her creator is easily mistaken for human because women's roles are similarly subservient and because women are not meant to display the same evidence of humanity as men, such as possessing a voice or self-determination.<sup>10</sup>

My focus is on the way that her destruction on the basis of Gabirol's claim that she is not human aligns with anthropocentric, sexist, and racist hierarchies of personhood. Gabirol's desire to show her off to the king, subsequently proving that he had the power to destroy her, positions the Golem not as guardian or protector, but merely as the toy of powerful men. However, this tale is somewhat elucidated in Isaac Bashevis Singer's rendition of the story:

...a female Golem created by the great Jewish poet and philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol who suffered from a severe skin sickness, perhaps leprosy, and had to live in isolation. He was said to have created the woman Golem to keep house for him, to be his companion or perhaps his concubine. According to the legend, this Golem was put together from wood and hinges - not a very convenient helpmate for a genius with a vulnerable skin. He was forced to get rid of her only when the religious leaders discovered her...Also, since a Golem is not born from men's semen and is not grown in a woman's womb, there was no sin in destroying her. ("The Golem Is a Myth for Our Time")

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<sup>10</sup> There are certainly other ways to understand what is at stake in the destruction of Gabirol's female golem. As necromancy was a key concern for rulers in the early modern period, I acknowledge that my scholarship on this story could be extended to discuss other anxieties that the king shows about the reanimation of the dead.



This more specific rendition is worse in that Singer's more painstaking rationale illustrates how easy it is to elide the female Golem and a woman, the latter being merely and perhaps unnecessarily a human embodiment of servant and sex slave. At the core, Gabirol chose to create a Golem as his housekeeper, his friend, and his sexual plaything. This provides a critical case-study on how men traditionally perceived the purpose of women. Again, unlike the traditional end to the Golem which comes about because the Golem "runs amok," disobeying orders and wreaking havoc, the female Golem is destroyed in order for Gabirol to avoid the penalty of patriarchal law.

The demonstration of patriarchal alliance through the destruction of a female body is the important aspect of the story. Only at the moment of her death is the single female being distinguished from human women. Considering this alongside the tradition of male Golem stories, it is reasonable to conclude that the resemblance to humanity itself is the crime of the female Golem. Feminine submission to patriarchal control, then, is the one condition of belonging to humanity. Feminine human being, then, is only validated through demonstration of traits that belong to the animal side of the human-animal binary. On the other hand, the threat of disruption that comes with the male Golem seems to haunt this story. In effect, then, the female Golem's expression of disruptive emotion—anger, desire, rebellion—is pre-empted by patriarchal law. Gabirol destroys his female servant in advance of the threat of exposure, thus demonstrating the power of the male patriarch to control his household. This story is an allegory for the experiences of Jewish women, dramatizing the more familiar experiences of inequality and subjugation of women within a patriarchal gender system.

This repeats the long tradition in which the human as an ontological category is elided with the male subject of history while women are tacitly constructed as the subhuman.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, whether Gabirol's Golem was capable of any feeling or cognition is unknown. Gabirol's decision to omit the possibility of her sentience is the real problem. Unlike her male counterparts, past versions of the female Golem are never granted sentience; she is neither a protector of the weak nor a guardian of the Jews. She is nameless, an object to be debased. In fact, there is absolutely no condemnation on the part of the man using the Golem for this purpose—the only sin according to the religious leaders<sup>12</sup> is that he did not destroy her sooner. Anxieties surrounding 'black magic' only emerge prominently when the creature is female; otherwise, the creator's power to make such judgements remains unquestioned. Indeed, the traditional Golem myth requires that the man who creates the Golem must be a "...most pious and righteous man, a *tzaddik*...thoroughly learned in *Cabala*, a mystical body of knowledge aimed at understanding the hidden nature of G-d...to heal the sick and combat evil" (Wisniewski 29). That the female Golem carries out the roles of servant and sexual object and is disposable could easily slide into a devaluation of women's traditional work in the patriarchal household and the further devaluation of women's humanity.

By contrast, most historical male Golem myths toy with the notion of the Golem's humanity—at least acknowledging that we should question how 'human' Golems are. For instance, in David Wisniewski's 1996 children's book *Golem*, even though the male Golem "...had not truly been a man, they recited Kaddish, the prayer for the dead [for the Golem]," illustrating

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<sup>11</sup> For more on scholarship concerning other identities socially constructed as less human, see Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Duke UP, 2018. and Jackson, Zakkiya Iman. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*. NYU Press: New York, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the religious leaders take the place of the king in Singer's rendition and have different concerns; rather than necromancy, they are more concerned with the female Golem's status as a concubine.

that this male Golem was considered almost human, as the community thinks of him on the same level as Jewish men (Wisniewski 28). Likewise, Ausubel's Golem of Prague myth included in *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People* describes how the rabbis and Jewish men of the community who killed the Golem "washed their hands and uttered prayers of purification, as one usually does after being near a corpse" (611). Since the Golem is physically only "a hunk of hardened clay" it is interesting that the religious men consider him to be human enough to give him this respect and treat him with this distinctly human dignity. It is acceptable to defy convention without protest due to the masculinity of the Golem, which humanizes him, highlighting the link between the male and the human. On the contrary, Gabirol's female Golem is casually destroyed, and to add insult to injury, "there was no sin in destroying her," since she was immediately disregarded as inhuman. Perhaps this is because "Gender operate[s] as a more profound category of difference than race," making the female Golem more of an "Other" than male Golems (Jackson 7). Nevertheless, she was clearly somewhat anatomically human due to their sexual encounters. Regardless of the physical appearance, whether or not the author considers the Golem human—or equal to humans—is a crucial question that I pose for these stories, for the response often determines the Golem's fate.

### 3.0 On the Shoulders of Giants: Wecker's Subversion of Gabirol's Golem

Beginning from a recognition of the female Golem's resemblance to women in patriarchal culture, both Wecker's and Hoffman's texts figuratively reach back to the etymological origins of the word "Golem" to find other possibilities. A Golem is not only a clay being, but more figuratively, an unfinished creature: "...an unmarried woman was considered to be, like an unmarried man, an imperfect being, and she was referred to in classical texts as a Golem" (Idel 232). Moshe Idel provides insight on the connection between (human) women without masters/husbands and the non-human homunculi created only to serve male masters. Women are only complete when fulfilling their roles as servants to their husband and family. This view is echoed in the *X-Files* episode "The Golem": a grieving woman creates a male Golem to avenge her fiancé Isaac's death because she is unable to function independently, rendering her "a Golem in the sense that she is incomplete without Isaac" (Nocks 296). This connection is at the root of Wecker's and Hoffman's use of the female Golem to look at women's construction as less fully human within patriarchal society. In both *The Golem and the Jinni* and *The World That We Knew*, each female Golem's process of becoming integrated into human society coincides with learning to be a feminine caretaker.

At the same time, both novels explore the ontological potential of the Golem. Jewish historian Lisa Nocks has reconsidered this "missing, unfinished or unresolved" aspect of the Golem, arguing that the term imperfect should be understood as the "unformed (understood as unfinished, but with potential)" nature of the Golem's soul (283-84). This lack of a fully developed soul, Nocks concludes, guarantees that the Golem "implicitly remains subordinate to his creator and to other humans" (284). However, just as the unfinished status links the unmarried woman and

the Golem, conferring a less-than-human status on women, it can also imply human potential in the Golem. The Golem could become human in its finished state, and this is the potential that both Wecker's Chava and Hoffman's Ava realize in different ways in each narrative. Both Wecker and Hoffman reverse the terms of this connection by exploring the development of the female Golem's selfhood as a rejection of the naturalized subordination of women.

As referenced above, Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* details the journey of the female Golem Chava, created by the estranged Rabbi Schaalman. Chava's master dies at sea on the way to New York City from Eastern Europe. Masterless, Chava navigates the social expectations of late-nineteenth century America with the help of elderly Rabbi Meyer. She meets Ahmad, a Jinni trapped for centuries who was spirited away from his homeland of Syria and now also is finding his place as an immigrant in America. After Rabbi Meyer dies, Chava marries his nephew to better fit in with her community. However, the climax of the novel reveals that Chava's creator, Rabbi Schaalman, was also the Jinni's master who had enslaved him, through his reincarnations, for centuries. The journey for their freedom and equality, as well as how Chava and Ahmad negotiate their separate identities as immigrant Others, delineates the story as one of immigrant experience and humanity. Wecker specifically legitimizes Chava by modernizing the ancient female Golem myth through the creation of a sentient and feeling character. Wecker joins other contemporary writers who reexamine and expand upon overlooked, degraded, or vilified characters, decentering the versions previously granted cultural authority<sup>13</sup>. By mirroring the previous Golem myth of the female Golem created for a man's pleasure, Wecker expands on the original myth in a full novel, thus participating in a broad movement which speaks to a bigger cultural shift in how women are represented.

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<sup>13</sup> Such as Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Marissa Meyer's *Heartless*, and Sarah Henning's *Sea Witch*.

In order to understand Chava's journey to freedom, it is necessary to investigate the undisputed authority of creators of Golems who effectively characterize the dominant male power structure. This imbalance has large implications in the context of the female Golem, since the placement of traditionally well-regarded holy men, called Tzaddikim, in the position of creators validates their misogyny and their creation of sexual slaves in the form of the female Golem. Wecker undermines the role of the creator in *The Golem and the Jinni* through the female Golem Chava's creator Rabbi Schaalman. Schaalman's characterization as "brilliant, and reckless, and quite amoral," rather than revered, shifts the previous Golem narrative in a significant manner (Wecker 40). This emphasis on the making of the Golem, and the specific diction, demonstrates a subtle critique of hierarchy. The basis of religious patriarchy stems from the assumption that G-d is above Adam, or Man, and that Man in turn is superior to Eve, or Woman. This structural relationship of someone in power creating a subordinate is mimicked in the creation of the Golem, in this case, Chava.

Nonetheless, Schaalman is not a Tzaddik, or holy man, but rumored to be "a disgraced rabbi who'd been driven out of his congregation...[and] liked to dabble in the more dangerous of the Kabbalistic arts, and he was willing to offer his services for a price" (Wecker 1-2). Therefore, the novel casts the shadow of immorality on the creation of life to control, use, and discard. Far from being a respected member of the Jewish community, he lives alone in isolation in a "dilapidated shack, deep in the forest... The path to the front door was a half-trampled trail. Greasy, yellowish smoke drifted from a chimney-pipe, the only sign of habitation" (Wecker 2). This echoes Baer's rendition of Gabirol as Creator who "suffered from a severe skin disease that required him to isolate himself from other human beings," which is substantiated by Bashevis' rendition (Baer 20). Whereas this skin disease gave Gabirol a reason to remain in isolation, and somewhat excused

his creation of the female Golem, Schaalman has no such disease. With this, Wecker intends to make readers uncomfortable with this isolation, rendering Schaalman abject. Wecker therefore illustrates her familiarity with a combination of Gabirol renditions but chooses not to mimic a specific retelling. While these undesirable qualities of Schaalman are delivered as the perceptions of his male client Rotfeld, who is far from a paragon of human virtue, Rotfeld's framing paints Schaalman as an outcast from the Jewish community. Consequently, the creation of Chava as a docile slave made "for the pleasures of a bed" by this man who is very clearly not G-d, but a man who does not even have G-d on his side, acts as a pointed critique from Wecker (2). Indeed, these makers follow formulas to create life much as a chemist does, but it is important to distinguish that these agents of creation do not have inherently godly or spiritual skill that allows them to divinely infuse life. Thus, Wecker uses Schaalman's abjection to interrogate the relationship between past creators of the Golem and divine authority.

Wecker also questions Schaalman's authority through the choice of his name, which literally translates to "creator of vessels." This is particularly symbolic in the context of *The Golem and the Jinni*, for Chava as female Golem epitomizes the "vessel." Primarily, golems are often perceived as empty vessels to control; however, women are also seen under patriarchal systems as vessels, for misogynistic thought dictates that women have a passive role whose purpose is to act as vessels for male children. Likewise, Chava is racialized as a Golem, a species traditionally seen as distinct from and inferior to humans; she is also racialized a Jewish woman. This is not unlike anti-black racism, which is often "the process of imagining black people as an empty vessel, a nonbeing, a nothing, an ontological zero" (Jackson 1). Thus, the symbol of the vessel is often one utilized to dehumanize the Other and to attempt to render them passive figures through the elision of race and species. The symbol of the vessel also functions as an alibi for exploitation. If a vessel

is 'empty' why not use or fill it? If a land is not being 'used' by its inhabitants in ways which we recognize, why not take it? Thus, there exists a logic of exploitation latent in the framing as vessel that Wecker clearly links with the character of Schaalman as villain.

Wecker not only questions Schaalman as Creator but Rotfeld as Master. Wecker nuances Rotfeld's character when he requests that Schaalman make his Golem wife dutiful, modest, and possessing "curiosity...and intelligence" (Wecker 4). While this may appear a progressive portrayal of Rotfeld, he only chooses to request these characteristics because they are those of his younger sister. So, the attributes belong to her subordination in his mind of a chaste woman. Rotfeld also desires Schaalman to "make her proper. Not...lascivious. A gentleman's wife" (Wecker 4). Thus the attributes of curiosity and intelligence are expressly curtailed by the desire to circumscribe her sexuality. Regardless of motive, this request marks an enormous shift from the sexual fantasy of a silent but compliant woman in the previous female Golem myths. However, it is significant that Schaalman inwardly expresses doubt at this progress, "wonder[ing] if the man knew what he was asking for," which Wecker uses to further characterize him as a villain (Wecker 4). When Rotfeld dies after bringing the Golem to life, Wecker gives readers an unprecedented case of a masterless female Golem. Until Wecker's rendition, "in the original conception the Golem came to life only while the ecstasy of his creator lasted" (Scholem 99). Since Wecker so clearly bases the foundation of her female Golem story on previous myths, it is interesting to reflect that if Rotfeld had not perished, Chava would have followed in this misogynist tradition of anticipating only the needs and wants of her master. Perhaps this deviation is not only a feminist commentary intended to empower Jewish women, but also a commentary on an antiquated view of marriage being replaced with a more egalitarian one.



Wecker's characterization and portrayal of Rotfeld as Master in dialogue with Chava's labor is Wecker's primary method of rewriting women's social roles. In *The Golem and the Jinni* when Rotfeld desires a female Golem, Wecker is clear that "[o]n top of his arrogant disposition, he was gangly and unattractive" (13). His disagreeable appearance and aggressive attitude do not characterize him as the hero of the story, as Wecker demonstrates how he only yearns for the female Golem because no woman wanted him in the first place. This condemnation of misogyny marks a huge turn from the previous Golem myths. Whereas this man would traditionally have been excused and his unhealthy sexual desires rationalized, Wecker instead advocates and empathizes with the female Golem. In addition, Wecker subverts the previous instances where the female Golem acted as a maid-servant, because the male authors thought of domestic menial labor as the only labor women were created to do. Wecker critiques the tasks of cleaning and housekeeping from the original myth where the female Golem functions as a maid-servant through Chava's housekeeping with Rabbi Meyer, acknowledging that housework is the only means at Chava's, and women's, disposal when they are effectively created for men and kept from the privileges of men.

Thus, Rabbi Meyer comes to share the role of Creator with Schaalman when Chava arrives in New York. Rabbi Meyer himself names the female Golem "Chava" (after his late grandmother),<sup>14</sup> which situates him to share the role of Creator with Rabbi Schaalman. Meyer as Creator not only names her but teaches her how to fit in with nineteenth-century American-Jewish society, making him responsible for much of her identity as a human and a woman. I contend that much of the Chava's identity as a female Golem stems from her name, as it alludes to her vibrant

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<sup>14</sup> This is also potentially because Rabbi Meir was the principal rabbi to comment on Adam as Golem in Sanhedrin 38b (The William Davidson Talmud.. Sefaria; [www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.38b?lang=bi](http://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.38b?lang=bi).)

energy. Chava's name, which is the Hebrew name of Eve, emphasizes her significance, humanity, and femininity as the "first woman" by situating her in a biblical context as a well-known female figure among monotheistic communities. Therefore, naming represents Chava's individuality as a woman by playing off of Eve's story within the biblical creation myth of Genesis.

While Chava's discomfort with domesticity, a woman's place in the American nineteenth century, separates her from her contemporaries, it mirrors Eve's discomfort within the Garden of Eden. Chava often remarks, in a somewhat plaintive, childlike manner, "But it's hard to sit still for so long!" (Wecker 53). While this restlessness could certainly represent a step in her journey of maturation from an innocent being to an adult, this ignores the value of her restlessness, disregarding it as a distasteful attribute. In effect, her tragedy is that she is a being who never tires, and nonetheless remains largely confined indoors. By having the direct connection to the word "life," Wecker implies that Chava is supposed to have this unique, overflowing energy. Indeed, to trap her in the confines of what society deems acceptable denies her path of personhood which is entirely her own individual narrative. In fact, Chava's buoyant nature and her lively spirit is appropriate for a woman who never sleeps.

Chava's anticipation, enthusiasm, and hope upon seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time also points to the potential of the female Golem. Chava immediately feels kinship with this "constructed woman," which demonstrates how Chava's empathy is an aspect of her curiosity which yearns to know and understand everything and everyone (Wecker 15). This curiosity is not human-centered and demonstrates how Chava had an enormous potential to discover and understand. It is significant that this profound and pervasive curiosity takes place between Rotfeld's death and Chava's meeting of Rabbi Meyer. This is the one time within the novel where Chava does not have a man guiding and directing her actions. Thus, Rabbi Meyer's education and

socialization are a direct curtailment of Chava's potential as something beyond what Rotfeld originally wanted, "a gentleman's wife" (4).

It is consequently unsurprising that Chava is not only bored with what conventional society has to offer and wants *more*. Scholars Naomi Rosenblatt and Joshua Horowitz use a modern and feminist reading of the bible to explain that the allure of the forbidden fruit to Eve in the Garden of Eden is potentially because "she's grown restless and bored in their sultry garden, where everything she needs grows on trees. The gate at the far edge of the garden calls to her and bids her imagine what lies beyond" (37). With this reading, it is possible to view Chava and Eve's restlessness in a broader sense of women attempting to leave domesticity and normality, searching for more meaning and purpose in their lives. Indeed, Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit demonstrates that she is "not content to blindly accept rules...she relinquishes a world of safety and security for knowledge and experience" (45). Like Eve, Chava's restlessness is indicative of her desire for freedom and autonomy. It is also relevant that Eve, like Chava the Golem, is a constructed woman. She was created, in the second version of the creation story, from Adam's side (commonly translated as rib). Therefore, Eve and Chava are both invented women, made by and from men in different manners, both placed as not quite as human or important as their male counterparts. Additionally, Eve as the first mother also situates her in a distinctive situation where she is a creation who becomes a creator.

Wecker similarly reworks gendered power dynamics by critiquing these societal conventions which limit women's autonomy. Chava's longing to walk outside at night directly defies social norms of the late nineteenth century, since women unchaperoned, particularly at night, were considered loose women and at danger of being taken advantage of by men. Rabbi Meyer confirms that "[w]omen alone at night are assumed to be of poor moral character. You'd

find yourself prey to unwanted advances, even violent behavior” (Wecker 54). It is certainly true that this was a common cultural conception; however, Chava’s yearning to walk at night is analogous for her desire for freedom and self-determination. Therefore, it appears that Wecker condemns the limiting patriarchal structures of the time by giving her freedom of thought, which is unprecedented in Golem literature.

The moment in which Chava runs for the first time grants her agency and freedom in a similar manner. The specific language used depicts Chava as a bird flying for the first time and experiencing true freedom as “her legs stretched behind her, her cloak flowed outward like a wing, and for a long moment her body was a dark shape flying away from him [Ahmad] at an incredible speed” (Wecker 279). However, I am less interested by the freeing act of running, and running as a new way of experiencing life, and more by why Chava never ran before this moment. She was always physically capable of running, but the unwritten social norms and pressures which do not explicitly forbid, but subtly discourage women, from such activities demonstrate how constrained by a specific order of behavior Chava is. This emphasis on controlling women’s bodies is because patriarchal thought ideally desires to control women’s minds. This worldview of Chava is primarily due to the politics of Rabbi Meyer. Unlike the villainous, overtly misogynistic Rabbi Schaalman, Rabbi Meyer’s sexism is in the form of a well-meaning paternalism, whose subtlety is in ways more dangerous. In short, Meyer’s paternalism of allegedly wanting what is best for Chava, and thus forcing her to conform with his expectations represents the epitome of western humanist thought. Regrettably, Chava continues to idealize him throughout the novel as “the wisest person I’ve ever met,” which legitimizes his paternalism (Wecker 241). It is thus significant that Chava meets Ahmad, a male Jinni, on the night of Rabbi Meyer’s death. Ahmad, who questions the institutions which oppress women’s freedom signifies a new stage in Chava’s life. When

Ahmad remarks that there is nothing keeping Chava from walking alone at night, Chava immediately responds “How could I go out alone, after dark? I would be noticed, an unaccompanied woman on the street” (Wecker 206). These words parrot precisely what Rabbi Meyer warned Chava against, demonstrating how assimilated Chava had become into patriarchal thought even after Rabbi Meyer’s death.

Wecker’s revision of gender norms is nevertheless particularly liberal, for she actively includes men within her feminism by deciding to split the perspective of the book between Chava and the Jinni, Ahmad. This deliberate choice to juxtapose a female Golem with a male Jinni demonstrates Wecker’s particular feminism and how it posits a relational matrix in dialogue with Ahmad’s character to reveal interests in the construction of masculinity. This gender theory, based in the terms of relationality, explores not only women’s experiences, but how men are also trapped inside these constructions of gender in a patriarchal system. This is physically represented within the narrative, for the Jinni’s physically-bound form offers an interesting parallel to how Chava feels metaphorically trapped throughout the novel (Wecker 27). The culmination of the novel, which reveals the Jinni’s master to be the same as Chava’s, strongly emphasizes how their enslavement and liberation, on physical and spiritual levels, have functioned in conjunction with one another. Indeed, Wecker seems to imply that one could not be completely free without the other’s liberation, which asserts that men and women must collectively address and dismantle institutionalized patriarchal values together.

It is easy to dismiss Wecker’s story as a typical love story where the woman needs a man; however, the Jinni’s specific relationship with Chava begs more analysis. Indeed, the Jinni is the one being whom Chava is unable to instinctively intuit what he feels. Unlike with anyone else, Chava does not feel oppressed by his needs and desires, genuinely enjoying spending time with

him of her own volition. Finally, the Jinni understands her, sees her for who she truly is, does not try to change her, and loves her because, and not in spite, of her peculiarities. Therefore, the envisioning of their relationship as being only able to exist through these conditions of equality displays Wecker's feminism and restructuring of masculinity.

Additionally, Wecker decenters anthropocentric thought by centering the novel around two non-human beings and redefining humanity and sentience beyond Western Enlightenment norms. Not only are both non-human beings; they are both magical beings from myths of Middle-Eastern origin. Thus, by deliberately selecting a Golem and a Jinni as protagonists, Wecker attempts to combat consideration of the "human" as a definitive and closed category "embrac[ing] nonanthropomorphic animal or technological Others, prompting a posthuman ethical turn" (Braidotti 29). While this may appear irrelevant to the feminism of the novels, it is important to remember that the questions we ask about animals such as questioning their souls, their emotions, and how we are ethically obligated to them have historically been asked about women by men. Indeed, the depictions of the female Golem seem to play out, in an exaggerated fashion, questions asked historically about women's being and experience of the world: How smart are they? Do they have the same kinds of souls as men? Are they fully human? Are they closer to nature? What is their experience of the world? These questions are made strange or defamiliarized for us as readers by Chava's status as a golem. It is because she is *not* simply an ordinary human woman that these questions about her role, desires, 'nature,' and treatment become so pointed and obvious to us.

Social expectations, shown particularly in *The Golem and the Jinni*, are a powerful shaping tool which forms how Chava recognizes her humanity. Chava's experience as an Eastern European Jewish woman in the United States communicates a broad stream of immigrant stories shaped by the transition to a new life. Chava's story illustrates the social power of gendered constructions

and the sexed body. The way she is socialized is contingent on her being in a woman's body. The female body is the fundamental way in which a person is recruited into heteronormative feminine experience. The nature of women's experiences, Wecker suggests, is through embodiment, through the way the mere appearance of a female body is subsequently gendered by society. The status of one's being as mediated by bodily forms as women helps to investigate how women are expected to conform to human culture and feminine expectations.

While Wecker attempts to restructure a gendered hierarchy that places women in inferior positions, there are times within the novel when Wecker's feminism is limited. It is strange that Chava is *created as* a being whose "natural" instincts incline toward empathy and service, and there is little evidence of her curiosity and intelligence beyond the kinds of learning that correspond to the instinct for survival in the days between Rotfeld's death and her meeting Rabbi Meyer. Again, Rotfeld's death forced Chava to hear the desires of the people around her because "Without the benefit of the bond between master and Golem, their wishes and fears did not have the driving force of commands—but nonetheless she heard them, and felt their varying urgencies, and her limbs twitched with the compulsion to respond" (Wecker 12-13). The word choice here is interesting, since the word "benefit" does not indicate a feminist perspective on "masters" controlling women, and certainly not when the novel is written from the female Golem's perspective. In this case, it appears that the empathy which Chava experienced with Rotfeld, and subsequently with all humans, is a disadvantage.

Originally, Chava's empathy prompted her to comply with her master's orders, keeping in mind that her master never had any need to care for her desires or needs. Even though it appears that Chava is at an advantage with her superhuman power to read minds, Wecker, perhaps unintentionally, is placing Chava in a unique position where in a way all humans are her master.

Chava perceives this as part of her nature, for “Golems are meant to be ruled by a master. A golem senses its master’s thoughts, and responds to them without thinking. My own master is dead. But that ability didn’t go away” (Wecker 207). However, these voices in her head are not in her control, and the quantity “nearly paralyzed her,” which offers an interesting commentary on gender roles within the novel (Wecker 34). The fact that Chava has no choice in whether or not she has this empathy implies that Wecker is forcing Chava into an empathetic role, which is traditionally thought of as a feminine quality. Nevertheless, the salient point is that Wecker does not seem to even consider that Chava’s empathy could be used for her own ends. Why can her empathy not be shown as a way to manipulate people, for instance? Within the terms of the novel, presumably, it is because Chava has no self and no desires. But then why does Wecker not give her at least some rudimentary characteristic that might be the beginnings of a nascent selfhood? Instead, Chava’s empathy causes her to instinctively attempt to nurture people, which puts her in a stereotypical feminine role, placing the needs of others before her own. Nevertheless, this empathy uncoincidentally reflects many of the specifications that Rotfeld initially requested for “his” female Golem, which begs the question of how much free will Chava has, in reality, throughout the novel. The overwhelming power of these emotions disables Chava. While this may appear merely a function of fantasy writing, this is only an exaggerated version of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which women are expected to engage in caretaking of those around them all the time.

Furthermore, Chava acting as a maid for Rabbi Meyer is complex, because it is certainly an improvement from the ancient depictions where being forced into doing this menial labor is her only purpose. While Wecker is clearly playing off this original myth, it is disappointing that Chava is brought to life to do housework, which reaffirms gender norms, rather than attempting to



restructure them. Chava does affirm, “I like doing the work. It makes me feel better. And this way I can repay you for your generosity” (Wecker 50). Although Chava tells the Rabbi that she does this housework voluntarily, it seems that Wecker is merely placing the desire for housework onto women—not a materially meaningful difference from the original Golem myth. It is also interesting that this conversation about labor comes directly after the scene where Chava describes how living in the same apartment as the Rabbi discomforts him. Because she knows that her presence discomforts him, she grows anxious trying to please him, which only makes the cycle worse. As contemporary readers, we understand that Chava immensely desires to please the rabbi and can sense what pleases or displeases him. Therefore, when Chava says that she likes doing the housework, it may not be because she genuinely enjoys this labor, but to comfort the Rabbi, making her feel better because she is conditioned to obey the commands in her head. Thus, even though Wecker attempted in this scene to modernize the original female Golem myth in a more feminist manner, it fails to a certain extent, ironically, because of Chava’s empathy. While the means differ, the outcome is still a female Golem as a servant to the males in her life.

Finally, the possibility of Jewish women’s education is ignored in this novel, for Chava does not enjoy learning or reading. That is not to say that intellectualism or education is the only way to advance as a human, but in ignoring this entire sphere of education, Wecker indirectly implies that a woman’s place is not in learning. Even though it is allegedly because of Chava’s restiveness, it does not alter the end result, which endorses the gender roles of the time. This bias is only furthered by the Rabbi’s internal comment that his hope for Chava reading “was too much to ask of her. Her nature wouldn’t allow it” (Wecker 53). It is unclear whether Rabbi Meyer is referring to her nature as a Golem or her nature as a woman. Nevertheless, because Wecker’s novel aligns the two in her interrogation of gender roles, it does not matter.



#### 4.0 Creation of the Soul: Feminism and Morality in Hoffman's *The World That We Knew*

While Wecker chose to mimic the structure of Gabirol's Golem story, critiquing the male creator and the patriarchal structure by delving within the myth, Hoffman, certainly knowledgeable about the myth, rejects this history in favor of an explicitly feminist revision of the Golem myth. *The World That We Knew* by Alice Hoffman tells the story of a young Jewish-German woman, Lea, and her journey with the female Golem Ava in World War II. In a desperate attempt to protect her daughter, Lea's mother Hanni begs the local rabbi's daughter Ettie to help create a female Golem as Lea's protector to ensure her safety throughout the war. As Lea and Ava attempt to hide their Jewish identities, they travel to Paris, and then to a convent in rural France. Ettie, who rejects her religious upbringing after her sister's death, fights and eventually dies in the French Resistance. Ava, who falls in love with a magical heron, loses him, offers to die to fulfill Hanni's wishes, but becomes human, abandoning her identity as a Golem.

In *The World that We Knew*, Ettie, a rabbi's daughter who becomes a key fighter in the French Resistance, marks the first instance of a female creator for the Golem. Hoffman deliberately chooses to have a young Jewish woman who "wished she were a boy. She had no interest in marriage or babies, only in the world of scholars, from which she was prohibited" (Hoffman 37). This characterization brings attention to those who were traditionally excluded from Jewish thought and intellectual activity. Hoffman signifies an enormous repositioning away from a patriarchal tradition and towards a feminist future by presenting an explicit commentary on how women are placed within religious Jewish communities through the character of Ettie. Ettie's position as a creator elevates her to a godlike position. Feminist theologian Mary Daly explains how "if G-d is male, then male is G-d," meaning that the association of the male with the divine

creates a pervasive impression that the male is somehow inherently elevated (“After the Death of G-d the Father” 19): a formula that I have already examined in my discussion of anthropocentrism. Therefore, Ettie as Creator distances men from the divine. In addition, Ettie often gains strength by imagining herself in the position of female biblical figures, such as Ester, the queen celebrated on the holiday of Purim for saving the Jewish people from annihilation, whom Ettie utilizes to express her frustration with the divine and rationalize her desire as a Jewish woman to fight the dominant culture (89).

Additionally, the communal act of creating the female Golem Ava points to Hoffman’s own feminist views. There are powerful women and no men present at Ava’s creation. Indeed, the way in which Ettie creates Ava as a female Golem, rather than a male one, is extremely telling. By having her sister place her menstrual blood “smear[ing] the blood into the indentation her sister had made in the clay figure,” the female Creators have marked the Golem as a woman (Hoffman 41). This paradox of having the menstrual blood, a metaphorical antithesis of creation, as the final “ingredient” to make a female Golem is directly tied to women’s embodiment. Ettie’s younger sister, Marta, who is cajoled into using the blood, is extremely uncomfortable with the situation as “this aspect of being a woman brought her shame, even when it was private” (Hoffman 40). Often stigmatized as “impure,” men’s fear of menstruation often acts as an excuse to exclude women from sacred institutions. Hoffman’s use of menstrual blood disavows the false binary of “purity and pollution,” claiming female power in a sacred domain which traditionally excluded it as impure (Ortner 72). Menstruation’s biblical tie to the creation myth “was associated with Eve’s original sin; in medical terms it was designated as that suspicious truant from reality, ‘hysteria’” (Basham 3). The subjugation of women through the menstrual cycle within the Jewish community from Ancient Israel to contemporary times is challenged by Hoffman as a “generative power of

female embodiment” which serves to positively define the female Golem’s femininity, subverting the original myth (Braidotti 36). The treatment of Eve in traditional Judaism is extremely pertinent for evaluating Hoffman’s modes of resistance within *The World That We Knew*.

Indeed, as in Wecker’s choice to carefully name Chava, Hoffman likewise draws inspiration from the creation myth, as her group of female creators name the female Golem Ava “reminiscent of *Chava*, the Hebrew word for life” (Hoffman 45). Ava’s link to the biblical Eve is thus linguistic and symbolic. Additionally, Jewish feminists in the last few centuries have attempted to revisit Eve’s tale, paying more attention to Eve’s female power and how it is relevant to contemporary women—this parallels much of Hoffman’s revisionist politics within *The World That We Knew*. Hoffman’s characterization of Ava as a strong, independent, responsible being aligns with a contemporary feminist perception that Eve’s actions constitute her as a “trailblazer who leads humanity from childlike innocence toward an adult life of challenge and responsibility” (45). Hoffman also appears to react against the stigma of Eve as sinful woman. Daly asserts that Eve, this name so affixed to the creation myth, “has provided legitimation not only for the direction of the self-hatred of the male outward against women, but also for the direction of self-hatred inward on the part of women” (Daly 45). Even when Eve has been forgiven, it is often because she has been rationalized as “a helper who is his [Adam’s] equal” (Rosenblatt 32). Therefore, the connection to the biblical Eve, who was blamed for original sin and the downfall of mankind, represents a challenge to the subordination of women, recuperating Eve as a figure through Ava. The joining of Eve and Ava appears to legitimize both constructed women who were denigrated in the past, calling for equal status for men and women.

However, the use of Eve as the cornerstone figure of both authors’ revisions of the Golem myth is a decision to question. Since Hoffman, like Wecker, is focused on the creation myth and

rewriting traditional Jewish thought on women, it is curious that neither chose to name her female Golem Lilith. Since there are two creation stories in Genesis, the rabbinic tradition dictates that the first creation story, which established man and woman at the same time, exiled the woman Lilith from the Garden of Eden due to her insistence on equality with Adam. Often referred to as a demon, Lilith embodies “women who refuse to yield to male authority” (Plaskow 55). More tangibly, “the first woman is also made of the earth, and not of Adam’s rib. When Cain and Abel quarrel over her, she (and not the battling brothers) is turned back into dust” (Nocks 286). The Golem, also a creature made of earth that returns to dust, would have made an easy parallel to Lilith’s character, particularly a female Golem. Therefore, it is interesting that both Hoffman and Wecker chose to carry on Eve’s legacy, a woman who submitted to Adam, and therefore legitimized patriarchal power, rather than Lilith, a woman who defied these limitations. Perhaps, because of the widespread stigma of Lilith as demon, Wecker and Hoffman wanted to choose someone who could only be thought of as a human woman. Lilith, whose female power “Jewish mysticism associated...with the demonic,” seems to line up with the treatment of previous female Golems, especially since she, like Golems, was also made from dust (Plaskow 189). Therefore, a Lilith comparison would have further emphasized ideas of Otherness. However, it is perhaps also because “Eve is Everywoman,” a recognizable and universal figure of womanhood who is often devalued (Carole Meyers 3).

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that Hoffman and Wecker name their Golems in the first place, as it is rare enough for a male Golem to have a name—usually, if he does, it is Yosef. Adam, whom the Talmud sees as the original Golem, would have been an apt name for a Golem constructed out of clay, earth, and dirt considering that his name is derived “from the Hebrew ‘adamah’ meaning ‘of the earth,’” (Nocks 283). However, this is most likely because

Adam, also lauded as the first human, would have been too great of an honor for a mere, non-human Golem. It is therefore interesting that whereas traditional Golem myths do not broach the sacredness of Adam's name, both Wecker and Hoffman, precisely in not using Yosefa, deliberately break the boundary between human and golem. This significance of Adam's name and the essence of the Golem as beings from clay is nonetheless quite symbolic in the case of Chava and Ava as legacies of Eve. Since Adam is "of the earth" and Eve, from Chai meaning life, is from Adam, these female Golems encapsulate the combination of the Golem: she is full of life because she is of the earth. Thus, the link between Chava and Ava to the creation myth is exceedingly relevant for comprehending the symbolism and feminisms of both authors.

This theme of creation permeates both novels, rendering Ava's and Chava's passion for baking extremely significant. It is noteworthy that both Ava and Chava find joy through baking, since it situates them, as creations, in the role of creators. Consequently, their roles as bakers represent their desire to become creators, to have control over themselves and their surroundings. Chava, in particular, imagined, "Stacking the neat rows of loaves, their brown undersides still dusty with flour, and knowing that she had made them" (97). Ava is situated in a much more overtly feminist novel, in which Hoffman criticizes the silencing of women and advocates for female power and resistance against the patriarchy. However, the image of a woman baking bread is also a limiting one which conforms to stereotypes of the roles of Jewish women; the image of a mother or wife baking challah is one lauded as a feminine ideal. Thus, it could also be placing the desire to conform with Jewish female standards onto the female Golems.

While Ava's femininity allows her to assimilate into European society, her lack of humanity as a female Golem situates her within Jewish thought quite differently. Traditionally, a Golem has an "animal soul," sentient and living with a basic soul called a nefesh, but lacking

higher cognitive, abstract thought of the neshamah which gives an excuse to treat them as lesser (Nocks 284). This classification is not exclusive to Jewish thinking, for scholar Colin Dayan notes that “[t]he Cartesian division between mind and body put nonhuman animals squarely on the side of bodies, emptied of consciousness, feeling, and awareness. Descartes argues that animals are machines,<sup>15</sup> lacking both immortal souls and mental experiences” (Dayan 1). This is strikingly similar to how Kabbalistic Jewish thought centers on the soul. According to this position, women and men inherently have different feminine and masculine souls (Berg 225). Supposedly, these souls are equal; however, the status of the souls likewise gives legitimacy to those who would treat women differently and as Other. The allegedly “separate but equal” status of the souls points to women’s being as “Other,” which “is inscribed on a hierarchical scale that spells inferiority and means ‘to be worth less than’” (Braidotti 23). Hoffman investigates whether or not her female Golem has a soul, which extends into the question of whether she is fully human. The physical appearance of a Golem is quite secondary, since Ava looks and appears to all people as a normal young woman. Indeed, Ava’s maker, Ettie, “did not see clay before her, but rather a woman who had been made by women, brought to life by their blood and needs and desires” (Hoffman 324). Whereas Chava is created to serve the needs of one man, Ava is created out of women’s needs and desires not in order to serve those needs.

Nonetheless, Hoffman’s conclusion about whether Ava has a soul is, “If you could love someone, you possessed a soul” (Hoffman 348). Conversely, Hoffman argues that those classed as part of the human species do not necessarily have souls, for in Germany “Demons were on the

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<sup>15</sup> This is particularly relevant for thinking about robots as Golems and vice versa. Several recent critics have drawn comparisons between the Golem and forms of Artificial Intelligence, but these comparisons are less productive for analyzing gender in dialogue with Jewish culture. However, for more about the epistemological status of the Golem as early robot, see *Weiner, Norbert. G-d and Golem, Inc.: A Comment on Certain Points where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion.*



streets. They wore brown uniforms, they took whatever they wanted, they were cold-blooded, even though they looked like young men” (Hoffman 7). This suggests that, as Dayan writes, “not all humans are persons and leaves open the possibility that non-humans might similarly be ‘styled’ as persons” (Dayan 4). This radical concept, which Hoffman imagines in terms of losing one’s soul, or being rendered soulless, demonstrates that there are consequences for those who wrong others. This punishment of evil, particularly a masculine evil, serves to put responsibility and penalties on men who are traditionally excused within society. This image of the male Nazi officers is therefore not coincidentally powerfully associated with an uncompromising hypermasculinity with no ambiguity, but a need for categories and dominance. In this way, Hoffman places the feminist Ava, someone not traditionally considered human, above the zoologically classified as human misogynistic Nazi officers, who act with cruelty and callousness. In Dayan’s terms, we might say that Ava may exhibit a greater degree of ‘personhood’ in certain respects than her human counterparts who have given up aspects of their humanity.

Hoffman offers a significantly more radical retelling of the Golem myth; however, there are still limitations on Hoffman’s feminism. Ava’s role within the story is certainly contingent upon her fight against persecution in World War II. On the other hand, the specific reason why she was called upon to be a protector was in order to act as a substitute mother for Lea, and to love Lea as a mother since her own biological mother could not. This perspective affords a complex messaging of situating developments throughout the novel, since it reveals how Ava acts under a compulsion, but not her own desire. Indeed, Ava does not choose to act as a mother, but is forced into this position. People throughout the novel often assume that Lea must be Ava’s daughter—the implication being that this bond can only exist between biological mothers and daughters (Hoffman 317). This ties into the common cultural myth of mothers not being able to resist helping

children due to their hormones and societal expectations. This is not to discredit the power of maternal love, which should not be disregarded. However, it is one situation to applaud Lea's mother for sacrificing herself to save her daughter, and another to force all women into the position of mothers without their consent.

One of the most striking and revolutionary elements of Hoffman's *The World That We Knew* involves her use of the heron-Golem love story. A similar link between being human and loving is made in more recent Golem stories; however, for male Golems, such as in Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Golem* and Paul Wegner's *The Golem: How He Came into the World*, this comes at the expense of continuing to see the female as an object of desire. Hoffman differs in that Ava's romantic love breaks through the boundary between species. Ava falls in love with a male heron. This choice is one of the elements of Hoffman's novel that opens it to a post-humanist reading. The relationship between Ava and the heron is an emotional and romantically metaphysical relationship. They both relate on the level of personhood beyond species instead of in a hierarchical relationship which emphasizes their differences. By the same token, the fact that their relationship is abstract reinstates a boundary between human and animal. Hoffman made the deliberate choice to give her female Golem a voice but simultaneously to keep the heron's language a mystery. Were this not fantasy or magical realist novel, one could argue that giving the heron a voice was not a reasonable choice. In the case of *The World that We Knew*, however, this is not an explanation. Instead, it goes to show how persuasive anthropocentric thinking is. The context in which a female Golem has a voice, sentience, and personhood can grant the same attributes to the heron. Since Hoffman's feminist critique leads her to questioning the patriarchal terms of the definition of humanity, this choice is an anomaly. By keeping this hidden world closed, she denies the heron

true autonomy within the novel and inadvertently affirms the Eurocentric normative human shape as the true precondition of human being.

The elusive figure of the Golem is challenging to categorize, for the Golems appear human, but they are traditionally thought of as essentially on the same intelligence levels as animals—they are able to follow simple commands but unable to have any abstract or original thought. Hoffman clearly says that Ava has a soul, and at the end of the novel, through Ava's grief over the heron's death and through Lea's love, she "becomes human." The ending is intentionally vague, so what it means that Ava has become human is ambiguous. Ava's achievement of humanity seems to be more about a change in status rather than ontology. Ava is clearly joyous, despite her grief, that she feels these emotions, and is therefore human because "she had been made flesh by Lea's love for her" (Hoffman 364). It therefore suggests that she has had a metaphysical transformation to becoming human. Ava walks away from her second-class status as Golem and "all that she was and all she had ever been" and chooses to submit to the categorization of human as superior by assimilating into the known hierarchy (Hoffman 364).

On one hand, Hoffman espouses post-humanist thought with this loving relationship involving a character who looks, acts, and seems to be a human woman. This ties into Hoffman's larger argument that Ava, and Golems, should be considered on the same level as humans, and treated with the same respect. However, Ava asserts, even at the end that "The world, however cruel it might be, was too glorious to give up. She had no rights to it, she wasn't human, but neither was the heron, and he had rights no human had, the rights of flight and sight" (Hoffman 311). This insistence until the very end that she is not human makes their relationship significantly less radical and makes it easy for audiences to remove the discomfort over the animal-human taboo, since she admits that she is not human. If she had this revelation about becoming human in the middle of

the novel, when the heron was still alive, then audiences would be more uncomfortable with their romantic relationship.

It is also distinctive that both Ava and Chava live at the end of their respective Golem stories. The Golems are always killed, either because the persecution of Jews has come to an end, and therefore there is no need for the Golem as Protector, or the Golem has endangered the community by running amok. Since Chava has already run amok in *The Golem and the Jinni*, it is reasonable to assume that Wecker contextualizes Chava's continued existence within the former discussion of persecution. If the implication in the Golem's death is that the persecution of Jews has passed, at least for the moment, then it is interesting to consider what the Golem's survival suggests.

It is also distinctive that in both Ava and Chava live at the end of their respective Golem stories. The Golems are always killed, either because the persecution of the Jews has come to an end, and therefore there is no need for the Golem as Protector, or the Golem has endangered the community by running amok. Since Chava has already run amok in *The Golem and the Jinni*, it is reasonable to assume that Wecker contextualizes Chava's continued existence within the former discussion of persecution. If the implication in the Golem's death is that the persecution of Jews has passed, at least for the moment, then it is interesting to consider what the Golem's life suggests. While Chava was not created for protection as Ava was, both authors, but especially Hoffman, denote that the persecution of Jews will not end anytime soon. (Or maybe it is because they are human and do not need to have a reason for existence).

## 5.0 To Live Unfettered: Humanist Limitations and a Myth Reimagined

In examining the ways that each novel both succeeds and is somewhat limited in its feminist myth-making, I am interested in how this indicates the tenacity of Eurocentric anthropocentrism and the patriarchal, sexist, and racist structures it entails. This intersection of the post-humanist and feminism shows how authorial feminist intention can be limited by the source material. Both works discussed not only reflect the evolving attitudes towards women, but also how the idea of sentience has resisted an older, patriarchal version of the Golem. Instead of giving life and taking life haphazardly, the metaphysics have been rethought. Thus, Wecker and Hoffman both play a large role as literary scholars and popular authors in rethinking what makes someone or something human. By imaging beings who are fashioned from earth and yet develop the sentience and personhood attributed uniquely to human beings (within anthropocentric thought) to stand in for the lesser, second-class status of women, both authors expose the male-centered conception of what counts as “human.” Thereby, they reject the logic of dominance and subordination of women. Our typical assumptions about the ‘givenness’ of what counts as human experience, especially via women, is what is at stake in these depictions.

However, the notion of the “human” is already problematic. For their Golems to be accepted as a “human” may be a backward step, as it does not challenge the essential stability of the category. As Braidotti, Jackson, and others have shown, it is necessary to question “human” as a category, and to recognize the hierarchical designation for humanity on which humanist thought bases itself. The necessary step to break down the category of the human in order to dismantle the hierarchies of gender and race it entails is evident in the terms through which both authors grant their Golems human status. Both Wecker and Hoffman imply that the way to be accepted as a

human is to go through gender—to align their sentience and their self-awareness with gendered personhood. Since Chava and Ava are female Golems, the necessity for them to act as “normal” human women involves performing feminine tasks and behaving in ways sanctioned as part of womanhood. This does not mean that they need to think and feel as feminine beings. Therefore, it would be possible for Wecker and Hoffman to write Chava and Ava as human by virtue of being at odds with their feminine roles. Instead, the female Golems succeed at assimilating as human only by affirming the essentially separate nature of women and men and thereby reinstating the very essentialist and hierarchical logic embedded in male-dominated human exceptionalism.

Hoffman’s willingness to extend the values personhood to states of being not embodied by humans, such as the heron, reveal the potential of working outside of humanist thought. Indeed, Hoffman aligns with modern animal studies thinkers when Ava bleeds for the first time, since “She [Ava] was experiencing emotions she wasn’t made to have. She worried over Lea in a profound way...acting not out of duty but from someplace inside...Was she meant to have blood rather than water and clay?” (Hoffman 172) This proves that Ava is sentient, since “if animals of a given species are capable of feeling pain, that suffices to make them sentient even if they lack various cognitive capacities associated with being self-aware, autonomous, or a person” (Varner 3). In this case, Ava has already proven that she can think for herself, but this proves to solidify her sentience, and shifts away from traditional humanist thought which relied upon the demonstration of self-awareness in terms only conceptualized within the framework of masculinity, whiteness, and European identity.

However, at this point in the novel, Ava has already met her love interest, the heron, and basked in the freedom of his company. When they dance together in the river, Ava recognizes that “this was what freedom felt like, escaping the bonds that tied her, doing as she pleased, if only for a few

hours” (Hoffman 131). The heron, unlike any human, “saw Ava for who she was. A creature like no other. The heron walked to her and she to him. This is how it began, out of water, out of clay, out of air, when it was not expected, when it should have never happened, when no one else understood who she was” (Hoffman 113). Evidently, the heron and Ava have a powerful emotional connection, which one might call love. However, this non-human love is not deemed “enough” to make her fully sentient under Hoffman’s rules—it is only the love for a human that can grant her sentience. Under the hierarchy of love, the heron as non-human animal clearly ranks as lesser than Lea as human, and the implication here is that Ava has “graduated” to a new, better manifestation of love. It also privileges maternal love as purer than romantic love, for it is also worth noting that this love that supposedly “act[s] not out of duty but of someplace inside,” implying that she does this out of the impulse of her being and not in obedience to her subordinate role and the duty that Hanni, Lea’s mother, envisioned for Ava when she ordered Ava to “Love her [Lea] as if she were your own” (Hoffman 50). Thus, Ava is also fulfilling the prescribed feminine role of a mother, which further proves how the imperative of gender dominates the terms of becoming human in this novel.

While Hoffman imagines the capability of the Golem to extend emotion to non-human animals, she still lauds the construct of the “human,” seeing it as a goal which Ava should strive for. Hoffman thus broadens the category of valuable life a small amount, but does not question “the boundaries of humanity, or, more precisely, the making and management of human boundary objects” (Dayan 13). Posthumanist thought allows for Ava to have an opportunity to develop without the constraints of conforming to humanist ideology. So while Hoffman starts and develops Ava in dialogue with the naturalized assumptions of anthropocentrism, Ava’s revelation after the heron’s death affirms humanist thought because “Being human came to her unbidden, it took hold

of her, and changed her. She was helpless against time, the owner of a fragile heart. She felt her pulse and the human blood in her veins. This is what love did” (Hoffman 365). Thus, human is equivalent to advanced emotions and abstract thought. It is also noteworthy that this revelation can only come after she realizes the page before that “She was more than she should ever be, made by women to be a woman” (364). Thus, she can only become human by becoming woman specifically within a gender binary system in which women are subordinated. Ava’s assimilation into gendered expectations and the category of the human represent the symbolic death of the Golem, and her rebirth as a human woman. However, this ending undercuts Ava’s status by admitting her to human status only through an ontological transformation.

Wecker, on the other hand, is more directly rooted to humanist thought. Chava is also sentient, but in the more traditional, Enlightenment sense of being rational and cognizant. Schaalman explains that “it would need some amount of self-awareness, if only enough to converse” (Wecker 2). This is curious in a variety of ways, since the original Golem never had the power of speech—it therefore appears that Chava’s speech is necessary to fulfill her wifely duties. Chava does not actually need the power of speech to voice her own thoughts, but more to be like the mythical Echo, who merely repeats what has been said. Wecker exposes Schaalman’s and Rotfeld’s narcissism in this manner: their goal of female subordination necessitates speech, even if in reality they do not want speech from her, but a sounding board. This mirroring of male desire is particularly relevant in the context of Chava’s later marriage to Rabbi Meyer’s nephew Michael, where she fulfills the stereotypically feminine role of an assistant, helper to her male superior. Since this marriage was also what Rabbi Meyer envisioned, and what Rotfeld wanted in a female Golem, it is productive to question how the desires of the creators have somewhat predestined the lives of these female Golems.



While both Hoffman and Wecker grant sentience as consequence of existence by as after their official act of creation, it may be necessary to question when this sentience occurs, in reality, and if perhaps we as humans are limited in how we conceive of sentience. Thus, posthumanists have argued that all living matter “is intelligent and self-organizing, but this does not in itself resolve or improve the power differences at work in the material world” (Braidotti 34). Therefore, posthumanist thought, particularly that concerned with the human-animal distinction, might use the Golem’s sentience to challenge the limits of humanism. The female Golem, therefore has the potential to reframe gender, race, life, and being in a manner that creates new identities outside of a patriarchal, hierarchical, anthropocentric system.

For instance, in the above quote which defined sentience, animal studies scholar Gary Varner delineates that this relates to “animals of a given species” (3). However, species categorization based on an inherently biological hierarchy which “anchor[s] all of the more and less elaborate taxonomic systems that have been devised to arrange, organize, and explain the diversity and number of kinds of living organisms” (Ritvo 2). The definition of species as “groups of organisms that can produce fertile offspring” is especially problematic in regard to the female Golem, for they are artificially made beings who cannot reproduce (Ritvo 3). This also defines the purpose of females as merely giving birth.

The false binary of “wild” and “domesticated” has also often been utilized to categorize non-humans (Ritver 4). The journey of Chava from a newly born female Golem to a cultured, sophisticated woman at the end of *The Golem and the Jinni* represented how Wecker “domesticates” her into a stereotypically female role. Domestication is therefore a literal and metaphysical cage which exists to control the “wild” elements of society. This behavioral dimension of categorization demonstrates how species is a problematic category for it justifies the

forced control and the exoticization of the wild Other. Additionally, species as a category is purely concerned with the biological—the Golem puts these categorizations into disarray, since she is artificial and not biological. Thus, the Golem as a figure has a huge potential to upset the category of species, as well as animal and human.

Through this lens of “wild” versus “domesticated” it is also worth considering the male Golem from earlier renditions of the tale who “run amok,” causing their imminent, and to an extent, predestined death. The male Golem, traditionally employed by holy Jewish men to protect the Jewish community from persecution occasionally does his duty by spying for rabbis, but usually the Golem exists to provide physical strength to protect the Jewish people. Thus, it is acceptable for the Golem to rampage and destroy, as long as it is in the name of protection, and under the direct control and supervision of powerful men. It is only when the Golem does this preemptively, and without the express permission of his “master” that he becomes a threat. It is therefore necessary to consider how power, or lack thereof, of human men determines the fate of non-humans. It is the anthropocentric quality of these Golem stories that justifies the violence on behalf of the dominant, ruling force and “privileges the perspectives of humans over nonhuman animals” (Probyn-Rapsey 11). However, the principal anxiety which permeates all Golem texts, and justifies the murder of Golems, is one of anxiety concerning the hazy boundary between humans and non-humans. Since Golems traditionally look exactly like humans, it makes it extremely difficult to differentiate them and categorize them under humanist thought, especially in the cases of Wecker and Hoffman’s Golems who can speak like humans.

The Golem is a threat to the security of the security of the human, for as they develop consciousness, they challenge humans to reflect on personhood as not an exclusive category for humans, but to encompass all living, sentient beings. Ideally, the status of personhood would not

matter, for non-persons would not be discriminated against and all beings would be respected. However, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of personhood, for the denial of personhood rationalizes slavery and subjugation of those not deemed people, such as in the case of Solomon ibn Gabirol and the female Golem. Moreover, the term ‘personhood’ does not necessarily have to promote anthropocentric thought. In *The Amber Spyglass* Dr. Mary Malone’s encounter with the mulefa, beings who have trunks like elephants and claws leads to a revision of her previous humanist attitude, for “she found an adjustment being made in her mind, as the word *creatures* became the word *people*. These beings weren’t *human*, but they were *people*” (Pullman 123). Thus, recognition of personhood does not automatically equate to legitimizing the category of the human. The Jinni Ahmad’s first reaction to meeting Chava in *The Golem and the Jinni* is “You’re not human. You’re made of earth” (Wecker 173). As a non-human himself, he does not deny her personhood even though he identifies her as a non-human. But just as there is an imperative need to expand the definition of personhood, the female Golem also makes it essential to broaden and rethink our conceptions of gender and Jewishness. The Golem as a potentially posthumanist figure also transcends the humanist assumptions about human and non-human animal consciousness and souls, as the Golem’s near-humanness but not-quite-human and not-quite-animal status could be used to push against the dominant cultural construction of “the Human.”

## 6.0 Conclusion

“Nothing essential happens through death, only through birth and that is the whole trouble—but shouldn’t we be speaking of something more important than life or death?”

—Meyrink<sup>16</sup>

Theoretically, the female Golem as an idea and myth provides an occasion for feminist interventions that step beyond human exceptionalism. The Golem, as a being, is a figure for women and racialized others because its appearance as human is attended by and even necessitates measurements of inferiority that place it on the human-animal continuum. The female Golem especially offers the image of a posthuman person who forces us the rethinking of the measurements of sentience and personhood. Hoffman and Wecker both question the status of women through explorations of the potential of the female, which allows them to challenge the category of the human as limited by male-centered definitions and to rethink our definition of humanity in order to include women’s experiences. However, we should be asking why Chava and Ava barely make the cut. My critique mainly focuses on the ending of the novels, and how the Golems lose their sense of identity by assimilating to become human and “domesticated” at the end.<sup>17</sup> Fantasy has the freedom and flexibility that it would have been much easier and societally acceptable to position and realize the Golem as a posthuman person who rewrites the terms of sentience and personhood to liberate women. Especially because the Golem is neither human nor

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<sup>16</sup> Meyrink, Gustav. *The Angel of the West Window*. Dedalus, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> Chava’s assimilation to a Jewish human woman at the end of *The Golem and the Jinni* will certainly be complicated by the upcoming sequel *The Hidden Palace*, which will be available in June 2021.

animal, the lack of clarity in categorization presents an ideal opportunity to discuss the gender imperative of the boundary that separates humans and non-humans.

Anxieties surrounding the female Golem offer a productive opportunity to study the fear of an ambiguous boundary between humans and non-humans. This anxiety also has racial overtones, for there exists a fear of the Golem as a super race who could dominate regular humans with their physical strength and their superiority. On one hand, Golems are below humans, as they cannot speak the human language, making them appear less intelligent than humans. It is also comforting for audiences to conceive of Golems as mindless earth, for if the physical strength of the Golem is already terrifying to audiences, one could only imagine how the acknowledgement of mental strength would exacerbate these anxieties. Regardless, the Golem is traditionally thought of as physically superior<sup>18</sup> but mentally inferior. This is quite similar to the seemingly paradoxical manner of thinking of blackness, which is “produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially ‘everything and nothing’ at the register of ontology” (Jackson 3). In the case of Wecker and Hoffman, the racialization of Golems also pertains to the racialization as Jews. The treatment of Golems thus reflects anxieties over mixed races and acts as a metaphor for racism and anti-Semitism. This conversation opens up a further direction for the analysis of the Golem.

Ultimately, there never was “a human”—it was always a male, Christian, white subject as “human” (Braidotti 23). It is not that we should expand our definition of the human, but that we should get rid of this category all together. While Wecker and Hoffman have opened up a whole new, feminist, and fascinating manner of conceiving of the female Golem, their work also demonstrates the necessity of posthumanist perspectives for feminist projects. In transcending the

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<sup>18</sup> The anti-Semitic myth of superior Jewish financial power expands this conception of threatening power.

anthropocentrism that defines the cultural constructs of sentience and species, the Golem also has the potential to break through the sex, gender, and race binaries that are entailed in Enlightenment humanism. The Golem is thus an essential figure in disrupting binary thinking through the process of “becoming.” The Golem illustrates how everyone has the potential of endless becoming that extends beyond the boundaries of Western Enlightenment’s narrow definition of “the human.”

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