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Storytelling and Silence in Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* and Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House*

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Abstract

The continuous power struggles between three generations of Jewish American mothers and daughters in Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* and Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House* shape the protagonists' personal and ethnic self-definitions. The cultural differences between the generations of mothers and grandmothers that immigrated from Eastern Europe and their American born daughters or granddaughters generate multiple confrontations and misunderstandings, but also enable the women to reconstruct their identities. The article discusses the different types of rebellion and its representation in Goldstein and Chernin's texts. The narrative techniques that these writers employ in order to describe the characters' thoughts demonstrate that the solution of inter-generational conflicts is found in both verbal and paralinguistic communication. While in Chernin's text, the paralinguistic communication materializes into verbal

communication and eventually into a written memoir, in Goldstein's novel the unspoken mother/daughter messages result in empathic silence, rather than in collaborative storytelling. Yet it seems that in both texts, when mothers and daughters resolve the conflict and forgive each other for the mistakes of the past, the need for verbal representation of their feelings arises, and by expressing their feelings through words, the women finally establish an efficient cross-generational communication.

Key Words: mother/daughter relationships, women's literature, Jewish American literature, storytelling in the family, immigration, Jewish American identity, cross-cultural experience, inter-generational connection, narrative techniques, paralinguistic communication.

The continuous power struggles between three generations of Jewish American mothers and daughters in Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* and Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House* shape the protagonists' personal and ethnic self-definitions. Both Chernin and Goldstein portray several multi-generational mother/daughter bonds in which, paradoxically, rebellion against the authority of the previous generation becomes almost traditional. Born and raised in Jewish American families of former immigrants in different parts of New York, Goldstein and Chernin explore their ethnic identities through their texts, yet each author focuses on different conflicts pertinent to their personal experiences. While Goldstein grew up in an affluent suburban community and an Orthodox Jewish family, Chernin was raised in the Bronx in a Socialist home of Russian-born Jewish immigrants. These biographical details influence the settings and main conflicts of *Mazel* and *In My Mother's House*: while in Goldstein's text, the inter-generational misunderstandings are related both to culture and religion, Chernin focuses on the rejection of her mother's socialist ideology which intertwines with her cultural identity as a Russian Jew, rather than with Orthodox Judaism.

This paper will discuss the patterns of rebellion as they are played out between the generations of women on the thematic level, and then explore the techniques employed by the authors in order to resolve these tensions through narrative. My thesis is that in both texts the mother/daughter reconciliation processes on the thematic level are initiated through

paralinguistic communication that shapes the narrative techniques which Goldstein and Chernin employ. While in Chernin's text, the paralinguistic communication materializes into verbal communication and eventually into a written memoir, in Goldstein's novel the unspoken mother/daughter messages result in empathic silence, rather than in collaborative storytelling. [1]

In *Mazel*, the grandmother, Sasha, who was born and raised in a Jewish shtetl in Galicia, rebels against her own mother's traditional Judaism by becoming the star of the Yiddish theatre. In turn, Sasha's daughter, Chloe, who spends most of her life in America, experiences her mother's Jewish culture as foreign and irrelevant, and devotes her life to the study of Greek mythology. Chloe gives birth to a daughter out of wedlock, whom she names Phoebe after the Greek god Phoebus. To her mother's great surprise and her grandmother's deep dissatisfaction, the American-born Phoebe is drawn to Orthodox Judaism, which her grandmother Sasha had rejected as a young woman.

Similarly to *Mazel*, *In My Mother's House* portrays multi-generational patterns of rebellion. Rose tells her daughter Kim about her own mother, Perele, who used to write beautiful letters and "must have wanted to become a writer," yet she was a "poor, broken woman," abused by her husband and unable to assimilate in America. Throughout her life, Rose has been determined "never to be like Mama" (Chernin 15); she has become a powerful woman who is able to stand up for herself and she wants Kim to follow in her footsteps. Rose is concerned by her daughter's sensitivity and vulnerability, because she is afraid that Kim will repeat her own mother's fate. For Kim, however, becoming a writer is a way of setting herself apart from her mother, a passionate communist and human rights activist.

Cognitive psychologists, philosophers, and neuroscientists have hypothesized that humans "possess an inherent ability to represent the mental states of others by means of a conceptual system, commonly termed Theory of Mind" (Gallese 42, Gallese and Goldman 493). This capacity to make assumptions

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1 This article is based on my conference presentation entitled "Storytelling and Silences in Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* and Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House*," which was presented at Birmingham University, and on my unpublished PhD thesis: "Ghostly Bridges: Cross-Cultural Mother/Daughter Storytelling in Postmodern Texts by Ethnic American Women Writers."

and predictions regarding the mental states of others is also referred to in research as mind-reading (Zunshine, *Why We Read* 6) because it "involves psychological theorizing about our ordinary, intuitive, 'folk' understanding of the mind" (Gopnik 838) . In "Evolution of a Theory of Mind," Simon Baron Cohen explains that there are a set of synonyms for the ability "to attribute a full range of mental states (both goal states and epistemic states) to ourselves and to others, and to use such attributions to make sense of and predict behavior" (Cohen 3). Social interaction between parents and children, in particular, is perceived as essential to the development of this skill. Thus, when we consider mother/daughter relationships, we must take into consideration that the paralinguistic interactions between these women have a lifelong history. Sometimes these women understand each other so well that they become cognitively transparent to each other, but there are also instances where the daughters feel insecure and vulnerable when they seek verbal reassurance in addition to the paralinguistic one.

In *Theory of Mind and Fictions of Embodied Transparency*, Zunshine notes that "the words theory in Theory of Mind and reading in mind-reading are potentially misleading because they seem to imply that we attribute states of mind intentionally and consciously" (Zunshine 67). In fact, our continuous interpretations of others' intentions occur on a subconscious level and are, therefore, not completely accessible to our conscious analysis. It often happens that we misinterpret each other's intentions, drawing incorrect conclusions regarding the behavior of others. Our interpretation mechanisms are not ideal, rather they are "good enough" to ensure our survival (Spolsky 7).

The skill of Mind Reading is essential for our survival, since by interpreting other people's facial expressions, body language, and tones of voice we can, for example, navigate our social environment, avoid dangerous situations, or predict another person's reaction to our behavior. A reader's Theory of Mind or mind-reading ability will automatically be recruited for the understanding of fictional characters, just like in real-life situations, in response to the paralinguistic signals described in the text. Furthermore, a reader will observe the mind-reading attempts employed by fictional characters attempting to understand other characters in the story. According to Zunshine, "on some level…works of fiction manage to 'cheat' our mind-reading mechanisms into 'believing'" that they are in the presence of real

minds or real people whose states of mind have meaning (*Why We Read Fiction* 10). By paying attention to the paralinguistic cues that the readers encounter in the text we shall trace the unspoken intentions that shape the relationships of mother/daughter characters in the novels.

In Goldstein's novel, mind-reading enables both mother/daughter reconciliation and the readers' interpretations of the characters' minds. The mother/daughter dialogues are rich in narrated representations of the characters' tones of voice and body language without which the nuances of mother/daughter relationship would have gone unnoticed. Alan Palmer emphasizes the importance of thought representation to our understanding of the characters' minds: "The speech category approach of Classical Narratology is based on the assumption that the categories that are applied to fictional speech can be unproblematically applied to fictional thought" (Palmer 53). This approach, according to Palmer, "pays little attention to states of mind such as beliefs intentions, purposes, and dispositions and it does not analyze the whole of the social mind in action" (ibid). By noticing various thought representation techniques in the text, we will be able to observe the full complexities of the fictional minds and the social bonds in which they participate.

Indeed, reading only the verbal or spoken part of Chloe and Sasha's conversation would be insufficient for understanding the dynamics of their relationship or the implications of their dialogue. In *Mazel,* the tension between the three generations, and especially between Sasha and Chloe, reaches its peak during the preparations for Phoebe's Orthodox wedding. Agreeing to spend a weekend in the observant community of her future in-laws, Sasha cannot resist making acidulous comments regarding Jewish customs and religion. Sasha's obnoxious behavior towards her granddaughter's future parents-in-law is incomprehensible to Chloe, who often is unaware of the full context of her mother's behavior and therefore does not understand it. The readers accompany Chloe in her continuous attempts to relate to her mother, and it is only when Sasha's personal history is revealed that the readers and the daughter are capable of developing an emphatic connection with the grandmother.

Goldstein's novel, which begins in Lipton, New Jersey, therefore moves back to the shtetl in Galicia, where the grandmother was born and raised,

then takes the readers to Warsaw and Vilna, where Sasha was the star of the Yiddish theatre, and finally brings us back to New Jersey. The novel's first part provides a rather superficial understanding of the characters and their relationships. Only by revealing Sasha's past in the second through the fourth parts of the novel the narrator enables the readers to draw closer to this woman. Sasha's rebellious character is rooted in her days as an obedient, pious Jewish girl of the shtetl. Her sister Fraydel, an extremely intelligent and imaginative girl, did not fit the community's expectations with regard to the role of women in the family. Instead of marrying the young man chosen for her by the family, she commits suicide, impelling the family to leave the shtetl and move to Warsaw. In the city, the family drifts away from religious observance and Sasha's artistic career begins.

Fraydel's suicide leaves a deep scar in Sasha's soul; she commemorates her sister's death by lighting a candle once a year, but refuses to talk about the traumatic event with her daughter or granddaughter. Lighting a "little memorial candle on the eve of the eighteenth of June" is the only ceremony "to which Sasha devoutly clings" (Goldstein 20). Despite the ceremony's apparent importance, all that she is ready to reveal about it to her daughter and granddaughter is that the candle is intended "for the dead" (ibid). Sasha "rarely mentions Fraydel's name at all…[and] the stories she tells about her own vivid past all take place later, years after Fraydel's death" (ibid). Chloe and Phoebe thus assume that "Fraydel had died as the rest of Sasha's family had, as victims of Nazis…" (ibid). Despite Sasha's silence, the daughter and granddaughter sense the important role Fraydel played in Sasha's life and therefore make assumptions regarding the details that Sasha is unable to utter.

Sasha's reticence regarding her past in the shtetl in general and Fraydel's fate in particular establishes unhealthy patterns of cryptic communication between the women in the family. As Abraham and Torok suggest, the patterns of silence inherited from one generation to the next shape the children's mental states. Parents who have gone through trauma tend to transfer their experiences to consequent generations through cryptic discourses that hint at unspeakable events in the parent's past, which cannot be discussed explicitly (*The Shell* 166). Cognitive psychologists claim that human beings possess an inherent capacity to make assumptions regarding other people's thoughts and feelings, based on the paralinguistic clues that

they receive. This predisposition to theorize about other people's minds and unspoken intentions prompts Chloe and Phoebe's attempts to fill in the gaps in Sasha's narrative of her past. Their speculations, however, are not always successful, and they lead to continuous tension in the women's inter-generational relationships. Even though Chloe "makes such a wonderful audience" for her mother, "whose drama is always out there for everyone to see," she does not always succeed in deciphering her mother's moods and intentions (Goldstein 43).

For instance, Sasha's impolite behavior towards her granddaughter's future parents-in-law is incomprehensible to Chloe, who cannot understand "at least not at first…how the patent fact of Phoebe's happiness didn't dissolve away all other considerations" (Goldstein 9). Gradually, Chloe realizes that the Orthodox Jewish community of Lipton strongly reminds Sasha of Shluftchev, the shtetl of her birth, which the family abandoned after her sister's suicide. Partially blaming religion and the shtetl's community for the tragedy, Sasha is outraged to discover that her granddaughter is becoming religiously observant. Phoebe seeks to define her ethnicity through the religion which her grandmother had long abandoned, and of which her own mother was ignorant. In Lipton, Sasha realizes the depth of her own dislike of the "old ways" as well as the distance that her granddaughter's attraction to religious life creates between them. For Sasha, Lipton, New Jersey is nothing more than a contemporary shtetl, a bubble which the community, including her granddaughter, create around themselves in order to generate an illusionary sense of security.

Sasha, however, refuses to share with her daughter her strong feelings about the granddaughter's future home. Her anger remains undecipherable to Chloe, who decides to take her mother for a walk in order to avoid an overt confrontation with the future in-laws. Sasha's outrage at Lipton continues as the mother and daughter walk the streets of the town. When Sasha spots a "bendel" on the handle of a door, she becomes furious: "Look at that!," she exclaims, "A bendel on a New Jersey French Provincial: it says it all" (Goldstein 331). While for Sasha a "bendel" stands for the impossible irony that connects her past to her present, for Chloe this innocent object is meaningless. Once again Chloe lacks the information needed in order to understand her mother; she assumes that the bendel, which looks like a red ribbon tied around the handle of the entrance door to the house,

symbolically represents a husband's presentation of the house as a gift to his wife and family. She mistakenly assumes that her mother is outraged by the materialism of the gesture. Therefore, when Sasha explains that a bendel is intended to protect against the evil wishes of the envious (the Evil Eye), Chloe realizes that her failure to read her mother's thoughts derives from the lack of cultural translation, which her mother usually refuses to provide (Goldstein 331).

The cyclical structure of the novel enables the readers to revise their perceptions of Sasha as they learn about her past. Although the final part of the novel repeat the scenes of preparation for Phoebe's wedding described in the opening part, including Sasha and Chloe's visit to Lipton, these events are ultimately perceived in a different light by the readers, who are now able to understand the subtle and often unspoken nuances of Sasha's relationship with her daughter and granddaughter. The half-hidden messages that Chloe and Phoebe have been receiving from Sasha throughout the years are presented to the reader through the comprehensive third-person narrative in the core sections of *Mazel*. It is therefore the omniscient narrator, rather than Sasha herself, who eventually succeeds in telling Sasha's story and explaining her motives to the contemporary American readership. Sasha's consciousness, as it gradually becomes understandable through her past, becomes the central narrative of the novel. When the readers are made aware of Sasha's complicated and often traumatic life-story, her character is reconstructed by the readers. This allows us to understand Sasha's verbal hints, tones of voice, and paralinguistic signals as they are eventually understood by Chloe.

For instance, when Chloe attempts to find out why her mother dislikes the Jewish community of her future in-laws so much, Sasha makes a feeble attempt to explain her anger to Chloe, who surprisingly (even to herself) succeeds in understanding her mother. Sasha tells Chloe that "'It's not *just* the Kantors'" that bother her but

'It's this place!'

'This place,' Chloe echoed thoughtfully. And then a light had come into her clear gray eyes, and she had looked, for a moment, quite absurdly happy…

'Oh, I see what this place reminds you of! Of course!'

'Of course.' Sasha had repeated in the same furious tone of voice.

'Of course. Only it's not *of course*. It's *completely off course!*'
'Well, you know, darling,' Chloe had said, ever so softly, slipping her arm through her mother's and giving her one of her truly beautiful smiles, brushed over with a delicate gloss of irony, 'there's such a thing as mazel'" (Goldstein 15).

This description of the daughter's tone of voice and body language provides the information necessary to understand Chloe's accepting character in general and her effort to communicate with her mother in particular. Nonetheless, Chloe's soft voice and affectionate body language do not evoke verbal or explicit mutuality in her mother:

In response, Sasha had kept an emphatically stony silence, though Chloe, glancing over at her … had been able to see the thoughts dramatically traversing her mother's face. And just before re-entering the Kantors' front door, Sasha had given Chloe's hand one of those bone-crushing squeezes to which she resorted on the rare occasion when words failed her (Goldstein 15). This final gesture signifies Sasha's positive response to Chloe's attempt to help her mother accept Phoebe's choices. Although Sasha's response is not conveyed in speech, Chloe, who often succeeds in reading her mother's mind through observable body language, understands her mother's intentions.

In the paragraph discussed above, the minimal verbal exchange is supplemented by what Alan Palmer refers to as "indicative description," which is the "description of action that appears to indicate an accompanying state of mind" (214). Palmer suggests that the characters' states of mind can be conveyed through description of their actions as well as through representation of their thoughts. Indicative description allows for more interpretation, thus intensifying the reader's interaction and involvement with the text. The readers are expected to draw their own conclusions regarding the mother/daughter characters and the effectiveness of their communication, bridging over the unspoken nuances of the mother/daughter relationship. Basing their assumptions on the characters' paralinguistic signals, the readers experience the challenges of the mother/daughter bond through the text's narrative techniques.

As in Sasha's relationship with her daughter, the patterns of silence recur in

the relationship between Chloe and her daughter Phoebe. As the narrator of *Mazel* suggests, Chloe and Phoebe are, like Sasha and Chloe, "a mother and daughter, sealed together and yet worlds apart, questions and answers are always a subtle business" (Goldstein 35). Chloe's decision to have a child out of wedlock, fathered by a man who has the best possible genes she can find, remains a taboo subject between mother and daughter until Phoebe's adulthood. Although Chloe does not explicitly forbid her daughter to ask questions about her father, Phoebe refrains from raising this subject for years: "It had always been obvious to Phoebe that her mother didn't like it when Phoebe asked questions about [her father] so Phoebe hadn't" (Goldstein 30). Chloe communicates her unwillingness to talk about Phoebe's father through paralinguistic signals that are immediately understood by her daughter. The first time Phoebe had dared asking about her father was at the age of six, when she asked her mother whether her father "had liked chess, of which Phoebe was then extremely fond, and her mother, going white, had answered that she didn't know." Since "Phoebe never wanted to risk seeing that look on her mother's face again" (Goldstein 30), she prefers to keep silent rather than hurting her mother again. The impact of her mother's facial expression is so strong that it prevents the daughter from establishing constructive communication with her.

Just as Chloe, Phoebe, and Sasha interpret each other's internal states by processing each other's observable actions, so the readers infer the characters' mental states through their paralinguistic signals as described in the text. By making the mother's and daughters' facial expressions apparent, the text imitates their interaction, allowing us to identify with and understand the women's inability to establish an explicit verbal interaction. The text thus takes advantage of the readers' cognitive ability to make assumptions regarding the mental states of others in order to enhance the processes of characterization in the novel.

Phoebe is the first one in the family to break the problematic patterns of silent and indirect communication. As a child, Phoebe accepts her mother's reticence, choosing to define her identity through her mother's discourse on Greek drama. She defines herself as "Phoebe, daughter of Oliver Crittendon, born of my mother Chloe, by flash of lightening" (Goldstein 31). However, when Phoebe reaches adulthood she begins searching for her ethnic roots. Since the daughter lacks even the most fundamental

information about her father she assumes, for instance, that he "is a small man," while the narrator reveals to us that Mr. Crittendon is, in fact, "rather tall and lanky" (Goldstein 30). While the narrator provides the readers with an explicit and detailed representation of the father's appearance, the lack of this information impels Phoebe to satisfy her curiosity through qualified guesses only. Phoebe does not have access to the information that Chloe knows and which the reader receives from the text; this gap enables the author to replicate a real-life situation where a mother and her daughter do not possess all available information about each other. Thus, Goldstein's narrative techniques facilitate the readers' understanding of the communication difficulties faced by this mother and her daughter.

Despite the problems in communication created by silence, Chloe and Phoebe partially succeed in developing an implicit language of communication that allows the creation of mutuality without words. The second time Phoebe finds the courage to talk about her father, she asks Chloe whether her biological father is Jewish. Chloe, "too astonished even to panic," (Goldstein 31) eventually answers: "Well, no, as a matter of fact he's not… Does it matter darling? In response, Phoebe had reproduced an almost exact replica of one of her mother's truly extraordinary smiles, brushed over with a delicate gloss of irony" (Goldstein 35). An implicit understanding between mother and daughter is achieved through the daughter's use one of her mother's smiles (slightly revised), which conveys the importance she attaches to her biological father's nationality. Phoebe thus translates herself to Chloe through imitation of her mother's body language rather than through words. Nevertheless, something seems to block verbal interaction between the generations, and although an alternative, paralinguistic communication takes the place of words, it does not fully compensate for the reciprocal exchange of internal states through open dialogue.

As is evident from the text, Sasha and Chloe often fail to interpret Phoebe's poignant looks, and their inability to talk about their concerns and feelings lead to continuous misunderstandings. Phoebe's poignancy has always been a matter of concern to Sasha and Chloe who "rarely got an inkling as to what exactly was going on behind [Phoebe's] eyes" (Goldstein 18). Her eyes remain a riddle to those who love her: "no matter how much you studied [Phoebe's eyes], no matter how much you loved them, you

couldn't project yourself inside either girl's head and say how it was the world looked from in there" (ibid). The narrator's comment, focalized through Sasha and Chloe's perspective, implies that paralinguistic signals only might be insufficient for successful communication. Since Sasha and Chloe do not indulge in explicit verbal interchanges, their connection, not only to Phoebe but also to each other, remains limited and incomplete.

Goldstein seems to accept misunderstanding as an integral part of the mother/daughter bond; the collisions between the women are not resolved or finalized, but are rather left open-ended and unspoken. For instance, when Sasha, who is unable to accept her granddaughter's decision to return to the old ways, asks her to explain her behavior, Phoebe says that without religion she has "always felt like that dead man" (Goldstein 338) from Sasha's stories about her great-great-grandfather – Rav Dovid. In the story, the ghost of a dead man asks the rabbi to give him a proper burial, because "even the dead need the comfort of their own kind" (ibid). Detached from her Jewish heritage and failing to construct an identity on the basis of her mother's and grandmother's cultural input, Phoebe identifies with the ghost who is unable to find comfort even in afterlife. Phoebe's parable seems to suggest that Judaism resurrects Sasha's granddaughter from her spiritual death, providing her with the comfort and confidence she has always needed. Phoebe's striking resemblance to Fraydel, Sasha's deceased sister, emphasizes Phoebe's connection to her ancestral past. Yet, ironically, while Fraydel rebelled against religion and was rejected by the Jewish community of the shtetl, Phoebe embraces the religious way of life and joins a supportive orthodox community.

Phoebe uses an image from her great-grandmother's story in order to make it easier for her grandmother to understand her; she does not merely assert her connection to the religious world of her ancestors, but also translates herself to her grandmother. Phoebe's emotional and parabolic reply to her grandmother's appeal seals the chapter, apparently leaving the grandmother speechless. Goldstein's choice to resolve the argument through silence attests to the author's distrust of language when it comes to inter-personal communication between mothers and daughters. Sasha's ambiguous silence may be interpreted either as acceptance or as a continuous resistance to her granddaughter's choice. Leaving the interpretation open to the readers, Goldstein allows us to engage in the

complexities of the mother/daughter/granddaughter relationship, which is presented as a life-long process of attachment and separation.

Like Goldstein's *Mazel*, Kim Chernin's autobiography depicts multi-generational patterns of rebellion and reconciliation through which the daughters try to shape their ethnic and personal identities. Once again, the ethnic self-definition of the mothers is shown to be incompatible with the worldviews of the daughters', and it is only by understanding the traumatic experience of the previous generations that the American born daughters are capable of identifying with their mothers. Born in a small Jewish village in Russia, the narrator's mother, Rose Chernin, and her family immigrate to America, where the family's father has already been working for a few years.

In America, the father forces his children into the majority culture by giving them American names: "now we were Rose, Celia, Gertrude and Milton. We put away Rochele, Zipora, Gita, and Michail" (Chernin 36). At first, Rose finds this sudden transformation of identity difficult: "Can you imagine? Calling Rochele a Rose?" she says to her daughter Kim, "I didn't recognize myself. I did not know who this Rose was. But it passed, all of it, very quickly" (ibid). Rose accommodates to the new life in school, and after she has learned English, Russia vanishes from her life (ibid). While the children got easily used to life in America, Rose's mother, Perle, who remained secluded in the house, failed to assimilate: "everything was new to her and there was nobody to show her anything. She did not know how to do the housework. Everything was different, she had no one to speak with, she was overwhelmed" (Chernin 37). Rose describes her mother's life as a "living hell;" not only did she miss her gentle and loving father (Rose's grandfather), who remained in Russia, but she was also continuously abused by her husband. Her mental health gradually deteriorates, and she eventually attempts to commit suicide.

Rose's family does not explicitly talk about the mother's suicide attempt. The children, however, understand the subversive language of adults: "we weren't told it was suicide, but we knew. Children know" (Chernin 37). Just as Chloe in *Mazel*, the children subconsciously assimilate the adults' secrets without being explicitly told about them. Tragically, even the children, who desperately wanted to become American, "were mean to her;" they

"could not sympathize" with their mother (ibid). As Rose explains, "with our new clothes and our new names should we go weeping into the past? That we left to Mama" (ibid).

Although the trauma of immigration initially leads to estrangement between Rose and her mother, as the daughter grows up and realizes the injustice of her mother's life she becomes more compassionate towards her. Contemplating her mother's situation, the daughter makes an oath that neither she nor her children shall ever be victimized like her mother. Since Rose perceives Perle as the ultimate victim, she cannot identify with her, and she therefore defines herself, at least initially, in opposition to her mother: "I loved my mother, I wanted to help her. I would lie awake at night and remember those fists beating her, breaking her down…And I knew it would not be me" (Chernin 39). Realizing that through education she can redeem herself from poverty and victimization, Rose begins to work in a factory while studying in the evenings, determined to leave home for college. Meanwhile, the abusive father abandons the family, and the mother starts working at home by making handles for suitcases. The house suddenly becomes a pleasant place to be, and the mother's mental health improves. The mother turns out to be a skilled storyteller: "she had a special way of talking, her own wisdom" (Chernin 46); her stories incorporate Biblical elements and teach her children Talmudic wisdom.

However, when realizing that if she continues to support her mother and the many siblings she will not be able to save money for college, Rose finds her father and forces him to take responsibility for his family. Having chosen for herself the American individualistic life style over her mother's welfare, Rose feels guilty about this decision for the rest of her life. When the family moves with the father to another city, Perle re-experiences the trauma of uprooting. The mother has to redefine her identity in a new place: "while on [their] street she was admired for her stories, for the jam she made and spoke Yiddish with the neighbors, in Canonsville she was once again a nobody" (Chernin 48). When the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on the hill opposite the family store, the mother attempts to commit suicide again and is committed to a mental asylum.

Although it is Perle's inability to assimilate in America and resist her abusive husband that initially makes Rose drift away from her mother, when she

turns into an adult it is precisely her mother's victimization that impels Rose to become a civil rights activist and a communist. Ironically, while she spends her childhood and adolescent years in an attempt to become an integral part of mainstream American culture, her adult years are dedicated to what has been defined by the general American public as "un-American activities." As Janet Burstein suggests in *Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters*, Rose ultimately links her mother's suffering to the "wider experience of the Jews in the shtetl and to historic oppression of other subordinate people" (168). Strangely enough, it is Rose's unassimilated mother and her ethnic heritage that eventually shape the daughter's ideals and personal identity.

The story of Rose's self-realization, which she herself relates to her daughter Kim years later, presents two events as highly influential in forming Rose's future and identity. In the opening lines of the chapter entitled "I Fight for My Mother," Rose explains to her daughter that if she understands the story she is about to tell her, she will understand her life (Chernin 84). This chapter explores Rose's struggle to release her mother from the mental institution, as well as her participation in a communist demonstration that was brutally dispersed by the police. When she succeeds in bringing her mother home, Rose feels that she "won against injustice;" this makes a deep impression on her. Realizing that she can stand up against an entire institution, Rose keeps learning about the exploitation of workers and minority groups. Especially the stories about the Ku Klux Klan bother her mind: "all this reminded me of the pogrom; this we were used to for the Jews in Russia. But here in America?" (Chernin 88). Rose identifies with other marginalized groups not only due to her mother's personal victimization, but also due to the ethnic experience of Jewish oppression in Russia.

The other defining moment in Roses' life occurs during the communist party demonstration. When policemen on horseback ride towards the people, Rose suddenly hears a cry that shakes her world. In a flashback she sees a Jewish village and the Cossacks treading down and destroying anything and anyone they come across: "you could go so far back in Jewish history and always you would find that cry. Always, in the history of every people… That was the day I joined the Communist Party," Rose remembers, "now I was ready; I was developing as a socialist thinker. I had fought for my mother and now I was ready to start fighting for the people" (Chernin 91-92).

By connecting her mother's personal suffering with the oppression of the masses, Chernin not only binds "the personal to the political" (Burstein 168), but also joins her ethnic experience to Communism, an ideology that will replace Judaism for her almost completely. Although Rose still speaks Yiddish, celebrates Jewish holidays with her family, and sends her daughter Kim to Jewish day-camp where she learns about Jewish rituals and Hebrew prayers, she does not allow her daughter to repeat the prayers at home. Like Sasha, who finds the culture of the shtetl debilitating for women, Rose Chernin chooses to downplay her Jewish identity because she is unable to reconcile her feminist worldviews with the traditional perception of women in Jewish culture.

Although as a child Kim dreams of becoming like her mother and identifies with her struggle for the people, after having visited the USSR she changes her mind. Hearing about the institutional discrimination against the Jews in the Soviet Union, Kim refuses to define herself through her mother's communist ideals. In addition, after having read Khrushchev's report and learned about the constant fear people had been experiencing under Communism, she loses the communist conviction that she had shared with her parents and drifts away from her mother. Although Kim drastically revises her worldview, she does not talk to her parents about her disillusionment with Communism. Instead, she presents herself anew to her parents as an introvert poet, indifferent towards the struggle of the people to which her mother had dedicated her life.

In one of the arguments between Kim and her mother, she recalls having wanted to hurt her mother and prove to her that they "were no longer the same person" (Chernin 282). At this point, the dialogue between the mother and daughter collapses: "we stood a few inches from each other, screaming the worst insults" (Chernin 283). Rose does not understand what has happened to her daughter during her stay in Moscow: "Is this the child I raised?," the mother asks rhetorically. Kim's rebellious reply constitutes the daughter's way of defining her identity in opposition to her mother: "'No, she's not. She's not. She'll never be again, and that's what you've got to understand. I'm eighteen years old. I'm a poet. I'm not a political person. Politics just does not mean anything to me. Can't you see? I'm not you. I'm my own self'" (ibid). The repeated use of negations and the pronoun "I" signify the daughter's need to set herself apart from her mother in order

to construct her own identity. The lack of communication between mother and daughter is further empathized by the mother's reply: "'A poet,' the words ringing with so much contempt they made [Kim] shiver. 'A poet, this one a poet. That's all we need, another poet, and the world at the edge of holocaust'" (283).

In *You're Wearing That?* Debora Tannen applies Gregory Bateson's cultural theory to an understanding of mother/daughter relationships. Bateson's term "symmetrical schismogenesis," which means creating a split in a mutually aggravating way, describes what happens when cultures with relatively similar patterns of behavior come into contact: a behavior found in both cultures becomes exaggerated along similar rather than opposing lines" (Tannen 117). When applied to mother/daughter relationships, the term "could refer to a situation where one person becomes annoyed and raises her voice, and the other raises hers in response" (ibid). Such an interaction will most probably result in further detachment and enhanced hostility between mother and daughter. Ironically, Rose's and Kim's inability to establish a constructive dialogue derives from their extreme similarity. As Kim's father comments: "two people, just alike, so why do you have to quarrel?" (Chernin 293). Towards the end of the autobiography, the narrator/daughter predicts that she and her mother probably will continue arguing in spite of repeated reconciliations, because they both "secretly wish anyone [they] love will think exactly the way [they] do" (Chernin 300).

The lack of understanding between Rose and the teenage Kim continues well into the daughter's adulthood. [2] As Kim later realizes, "the same argument played itself out over and over again for the next twenty years" (Chernin 283). It is only when Kim's daughter Larisa is born in Ireland, far away from home, that Kim realizes how much she misses her mother. During childbirth, Kim suddenly wants to be brave like her mother, who did not cry out when giving birth. Terrified and alone, Kim "weep[s] tears of self-

2 Chodorow's claim that mother/daughter separation processes last longer than mother/son differentiation is reinforced by Signe Hammer's research *Daughters and Mothers: Mothers and Daughters*. Basing her claim on interviews with seventy-five mothers, daughters and grandmothers, Hammer describes how the primary issues of identification and separateness "follow mother/daughter pairs from a daughter's earliest infancy until she is well into being a mother or even a grandmother herself" (109).

contempt and loathing," as she admits to herself that she "[is] not the woman [her] mother [has] been" (Chernin 288). After giving birth, Kim's hostility towards Rose diminishes. As Kim recalls, "the first time I held my daughter against my breast I hummed a Russian lullaby my mother had sung to me. And of course I went on to sing all the other songs I had learned from my mother" (Chernin 289). Singing the revolutionary communist songs, Kim becomes nostalgic about her childhood and the past positive relationship with her mother. According to Chodorow, when a daughter becomes a mother, she may identify with her own mother (or the mother she wishes she could have had). At the same time, the new mother re-experiences herself "as a cared-for child, thus sharing with her child the possession of a good mother" (90). Through her mother's songs, Kim both enacts her own motherhood, and re-experiences herself as a child.

Interestingly, however, the daughter's "identification with her mother and her re-experience of self as child may lead to conflict over those particular issues from a mother's own childhood which remain unresolved" (Chodorow 90). Indeed, when Kim begins mothering Larissa, she tries to cultivate in her daughter "the qualities her mother had always feared and disapproved in [her]" (Chernin 291). As Kim herself suggests, "it was an act of protest against my mother's influence and power, part of my long and troubled struggle for separation" (ibid). Kim admits that "in those days [she] was not yet a good mother to Larissa" (Chernin 290). Taking her daughter along wherever she is going, Larissa attends concerts, museums, and coffee shops before the age of three. Ironically, Kim repeats her mother's mistakes: "twenty-five years earlier my mother had wheeled me in my baby carriage to political demonstrations…Now my daughter and I went regularly to Japanese Tea Gardens where we would have long political discussions" (Chernin 291). Both Rose and Kim, determined to shape their daughters in their own image, hinder the child's natural development. Kim eventually realizes that this burden was too great for a small child to carry. When the three year old Larissa starts waking up frightened at night, Kim returns to her mother's legacy of soothing her daughter through storytelling: "I told her stories about my mother's life, and rocked her in my arms. She'd fall asleep…And I would weep silently with loneliness and tenderness, with all the confusion of my life, and with an indescribable sense of hope" (Chernin 291).

Kim's "quest for something distinctive, something of [her] own" (Chernin 292) leads to continuous shifts in her relations with her mother, from hostility and separation to attachment and partial reconciliation. After having divorced Larissa's father, Kim begins developing her own distinctive lifestyle. Fascinated by religion, philosophy, and art, she aggravates her mother and bewilders herself (ibid). Interestingly, during the tumultuous years of self-definition and separation from her mother, Kim is drawn towards her father: "he understood me," she remembers, "'I don't know how or why, but he understood'" (ibid). The girl's process of differentiation from her mother is accompanied by her identification with the father: since the girl "wants to justify her rejection of her mother, and because she experiences her mother as overwhelming, she projects all the good object qualities of her internalized mother-image and the inner relationship to her onto her father as an external object and onto her relationship with him" (Chodorow 123). Chernin's autobiography indeed portrays a somewhat idyllic father figure: "a very gentle soul" who "had lived his whole life according to a simple wisdom of the heart. He found it easy to love, he had never hated anyone" (Chernin 293).

After the father's tragic death in a car accident, the mother and daughter find a way to become reconciled. On the night of the father's death, the mother and daughter feel the "first sense of something peaceful between [them]" (Chernin 294). That night Kim realizes that her "prolonged youth came to an end," and for the "first time in many years [she] puts her arms around her mother" (ibid). United by their shared grief, mother and daughter negotiate their differences and acknowledge their problematic relationship, thereby reestablishing a dialogue based on mutuality and understanding: "Well," [Kim says hugging her mother,] "we don't exactly make life easy for ourselves either." And then we both laughed and rocked each other and wept. And she said, looking up sideways from my embrace, "So, who said it's too late to learn" (Chernin 294). This scene of reconciliation combines elements of both silent and verbal communication that involves not only implicit messages based on physical closeness and body language, but also explicit verbal expressions of affection that both reinforce the silent understanding and reestablish the patterns of long-blocked verbal interaction.

In both Goldstein and Chernin's texts we have seen how the continuous patterns of rebellion and consequent reconciliation are complicated by a

parent's inability to discuss her past. Lack of verbal communication can hinder the daughter's construction of her personal and ethnic identity. Conversely, collaborative storytelling as portrayed in Chernin's autobiography seems to improve understanding between the generations and facilitate the daughter's self-definition. While for Chernin, autobiographical narrative becomes a way to rebuild her relationship with her mother and redefine her subjectivity in relation to her, for Goldstein, language appears to be a barrier, a difficulty that has to be overcome before fruitful communication can become possible. Although both texts employ the generational metaphor as a literary device that initiates interaction between three women with incompatible characters and worldviews, each author imagines the mother/daughter bond differently, as is evident from the images they choose. Goldstein uses the metaphor of soap bubbles, which implies the simultaneous separation and connection between the generations, but also hints to the fragility and vulnerability of this structure. Chernin, on the other hand, perceives the relationship with her female ancestors as a cross-generational flame bearing, thus creating a much more stable image of inter-generational connection in which each generation plays a role of continuity and perseverance.

Despite the different metaphors used by these authors in order to describe the mother/daughter relationships, both Goldstein and Chernin activate the readers' natural ability to interpret intentions on the basis of observable body language and paralinguistic signals. For example, when Rose asks her daughter, Kim, to write her life story, she "turns towards [her] expectantly, a raw look of hope and longing in her eyes" (Chernin 13). Observing her mother's body language and understanding the underlying mental states, the daughter is unable to refuse her mother's request. While in *Mazel* the narration of the past is reserved for the omniscient narrator, in Chernin's memoir the mother explicitly asks her daughter to narrate her life-story. Kim accept this project reluctantly even though she is afraid, as she is convinced any daughter would be, of "losing [herself back] into the mother" (Chernin 12).

In *Mazel*, the omniscient narrator interweaves the mother's and daughter's thoughts. However, in Chernin's text the first-person narrator herself is able to bridge the gaps in mother/daughter communication. Moreover, the narrator's/ daughter's sensitivity to her mother's mental states opens up a channel for verbal communication.

For instance, Kim's contemplations about her mother's tumultuous immigrant life in America, although remaining unspoken, are immediately recognized by the mother, who does not hesitate to demonstrate her ability to mind-read: "she looks over at me as if I have called her. And now she reaches out and pats my face, her hand falling roughly on my check" (Chernin 15). Here Chernin employs what Alan Palmer refers to as "indicative description," a "description of action that appears to indicate an accompanying state of mind" (214). Palmer suggests that the characters' states of mind can be revealed through action description as well as thought representation. Indicative description makes more room for interpretation, thus intensifying the reader's interaction with the text.

By describing her mother's actions Chernin takes advantage of the readers' mind-reading abilities, drawing them to make assumptions regarding the mother's intentions. The mind-reading triangle between Kim, Rose, and the readers, created by the text's thought mediation techniques, is based on non-articulated assumptions. Therefore, when Rose verbally confirms both her daughter's and the readers' interpretations, further development in the mother/daughter/reader interaction becomes possible: "she clears her throat. There comes into her voice a strangely confessional tone. 'I'd come into your room at night,' she says… 'I thought, this one maybe will grow up to be a Luftmensch. You know what it means? A dreamer. One who never has her feet on the ground'" (Chernin 15). Not only do Rose's words affirm our understanding, they also clarify the daughter's earlier misinterpretations of her mother's intentions. Realizing that her mother did not intend to harm her aspirations to become a writer, Kim reconnects to her, thus overcoming, at least partially, the continuous tension in their relationship. Gradually, the daughter begins to define herself in relation, rather than in opposition, to her mother.

The words of her mother also enable Kim to reconsider her initial assumptions concerning the mother's objection to her choices in life, when she realizes that Rose had always been aware of the dreamer within her, although she was also concerned with her daughter's vulnerability. Once Kim understands that Rose never intended to harm her by standing in the way of her aspirations to become a writer, Kim reconnects to her mother, thus, at least partially, overcoming the continuous tension that had long marred their relationship.

While in Goldstein's novel, the daughter's and the reader's assumptions are affirmed only through the mother's body language, Chernin's memoirs provide the reader with the mother's verbal response in order to confirm and supplement her paralinguistic message, thus hinting that mere paralinguistic communication might be insufficient to resolve the tension between the characters. Although both Chernin and Goldstein appeal to the readers' cognitive abilities to theorize about the minds of their characters', the readers' inferences are affirmed differently by each author. Chernin supports the narrator's/daughter's and the readers' assumptions about the mother's mental states through intensive verbal interactions with the mother, which later on lead the narrator/daughter to write her mother's stories in the form of a memoir.

In *Mazel*, on the contrary, where the verbal part of the reconciliation is often brief and unclear, paralinguistic communication is described by the omniscient narrator who explores the inner world of the mother/daughter characters throughout the novel. Thus, *In My Mother's House* facilitates the readers' direct interaction with the characters, involving us more deeply in the complicated nuances of the mother/daughter bonds. While for Chernin autobiographical narrative becomes a way to rebuild the daughter's relationship with her mother and redefine her subjectivity in relation to her, for Goldstein language appears to be a barrier, a difficulty that is by-passed through paralinguistic communication, which opens up the possibility for fruitful communication between mother and daughter.

In the final reconciliation scene, the narrator/daughter describes the renewed understanding and possibility for forgiveness, which takes place through an emotional dialogue in which thought-representation strategies are balanced with and affirmed by verbal communication. For example, recalling how they used to recite Lermontov's poetry together, Kim asks her mother: "Do you remember when you used to recite this poem to me?" (Chernin 306), and the mother replies: "'Do I remember?' Her eyebrows fly up, her eyes sparkle. 'You used to climb into my lap. You'd say, Mama, tell me'" (ibid). Several lines later, mother and daughter reach the ultimate paralinguistic understanding expressed by first-person plural: "I watch with disbelief the way the distance between us, and all separation, heals over. We are touched by a single motion of forgiveness" (Chernin 307). The mutual feelings of forgiveness between mother and daughter create an inter-mental communication reinforced by verbal recognition. The mother's intentions

are supported by both linguistic and paralinguistic signals: she touches her daughter's cheek and calls her by her childhood name. As Rose reaches over to hold her daughter's hand, she also says: "'I love you more than life, my daughter. I love you more than life'" (ibid). By choosing to finish her memoir with this verbal expression of love, the narrator/daughter shows the verbal affirmation of the physical manifestation of her mother's love to be necessary for the establishment of mother/daughter reconciliation.

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