

De-Colonialization of Body, Spirit and Mind in the Memoir of Deborah Feldman

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Conscious – and especially unconscious – God-representations play an important role in the development of an individual's psyche. God-representations can also be the agents of colonialization. They can make the individual consent to their own oppression. In the case of Deborah Feldman, they were part of the restrictive context in the ultra-orthodox community in which she grew up. But a different God-representation helped her to find a way out of this repressive system. In all of her struggles, the body was the site in which different God-representations played out and demonstrated their importance and meaning. Finally, Deborah had to make the decision over which God-representation she wanted to trust.

I. Preface

In her memoir “*Unorthodox – The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*,” Deborah Feldman reconstructs her life story and describes how she left the Hasidic Satmar community as a narrative of liberation. Feldman describes the oppressive structures facing this ultra-orthodox Jewish community, especially for women and girls.

Deborah Feldman's memoir can be read from many different perspectives. As a historian, you can see the preconditions of the Satmar community in the persecution of Jews in Europe, in the Holocaust, the Shoah. You can also look at it from the angle of feminist theologians like Judith Plaskow and Ellen Umansky and see that according to Jewish tradition, women will not stand at Sinai (Plaskow 1991, 11) and do not participate in the revelation of the coming Messiah (Umansky 1989, 190). You can also look at the memoir of Deborah Feldman from the perspective of sociology, or psychology of religion.

The oppressive structures Feldman describes need to be understood as a repressive intersectional reality where marginalization, colonial and patriarchal structures not only add up but represent an interwoven and complex reality of the oppression of

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body, spirit, and mind. Reading it from only one perspective makes the interpretation of the novel prone to blind spots.

The deconstructive and feminist perspective of Gayatri Spivak assumes this intersectional perspective. She analyzes different forms of oppression and asks: “Can the Subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1994, 66). Spivak criticizes Marxist and Postcolonial theories that neglect the perspective of women and their contribution to society. Such theorists do not take into account the multiple ways in which women are exploited: by sexual violence, by giving birth to too many children and exploiting their body, sometimes whilst being the only breadwinner (Spivak 1988b). They disregard the ways in which women are rarely part of decision-making in politics, economy, or religion. They tune out how women and girls are dis-

criminated against in education and society and are seldom asked to speak their minds or develop a voice of their own.

Spivak points to the intersectional oppression of many women, in a very elaborate manner without ever losing sight of the economic and ideological methods of colonialization and their consequences.

Similarly, I do not wish to deny or marginalize the historical and everyday denigration and suppression of the Jewish people when trying to understand the way in which women are exploited and deprived of their voices within the Satmar Community. For this, I will use the methodology of the psychoanalytic psychology of religion of Ana Maria Rizzuto (1979) and the materialist biographical method of Frigga Haug (1983). Ana Maria Rizzuto helps to analyze the unconscious God-images that shape our identity and where they are situated. According to Rizzuto, our unconscious can sustain several God-images of different character.

Frigga Haug points to the fact that women are not only victims but consent to their own suppression in many ways. Acknowledging this they are able to become active agents in their own life and can free themselves from the entanglements that tie them down.

My interest is to show the intersectional reality of Deborah's oppression and also "the tools" she used to find her way out of this world of suppression.

Deborah Feldman gives an insight into a very restrictive sectarian community. But she does more than that. With her book she testifies that liberation is possible even if all stakes are against it. The breaking success of her book far beyond the US market brought her fame and helped her to survive. Part of the success may be a kind of voyeurism into a hidden exotic world. But Deborah Feldman also represents a woman who made her way out of this locked-in world, and many women can identify with this.

II. The historic background

The Satmar Community in Williamsburg, NY, was founded in 1946 by Rabbi Joel Teidelbaum. His nephew Moshe Teidelbaum followed him in 1979 (Rabinowicz 1996, 484). Born in 1887 in Transylvania (in Romania) Joel Teidelbaum gathered an ultra-orthodox community around him in 1905 in Satu Mare, "Satmar" in Yiddish, formerly in Hunga-

ry, and now in Romania. He was a fierce opponent of all forms of assimilation and against Zionism because only the Messiah himself was supposed to create a Jewish state.

In 1940, before the Holocaust, Teidelbaum ignored all threats against the Hungarian Jews and failed to engage in the preparation of rescue plans. As the situation became more dangerous, he equipped himself and his closest followers with visas to help them escape to Palestine or the US. At the same time, he thwarted all attempts to cooperate with Zionist and other organizations that could have helped the rest of the community to escape. Teidelbaum himself made a narrow escape, although he had already arrived at the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. Bribing the Gestapo with the financial help of Jewish supporters, he managed to become part of a group that was set free to travel to Switzerland. He decided to settle in Williamsburg in the US (Keren-Kratz 2014).

There, he gathered other survivors of the Holocaust and founded the Satmar Community. Again, he opposed Zionism and any form of assimilation. He introduced strict measures to separate the Satmar Community from other parts of the US-American society. He tightened dress codes, especially for women who were to dress "in a modest way." For example, they were to wear thick brown stockings with seams. Teidelbaum even encouraged one of the Hasidim to produce these stockings called "palms," according to the English translation of "Teidelbaum". Married women were to shave their heads every month before they went to the Mikvah, the ritual bath (Mintz 1995).

Teitelbaum tightened the Hasidic rules against assimilation and intensified the "purification" of the community at a dire price, one which women and children in particular had to pay. He implemented a separate educational system, where girls were neglected. In the US, where freedom of religion rules over the rights of women and children and where the rights of the individual reigns over compulsory education, Joel Teidelbaum and his followers were free to make their own rules.

Neglecting education and pushing young families to generate as many children as possible has turned Hasidic Williamsburg and other neighborhoods into places where poverty and overcrowded housing are endemic. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Satmar Community hard because of living conditions and Hasidic leaders' refusal to close schools and Synagogues (Stack 2020).



III. Outline of Deborah Feldman's memoir "Unorthodox"

Deborah Feldman published her memoir "Unorthodox" in 2012, having left the Satmar Community two years before. Even if it is at times hard to believe, her memoir gives an insight into the contemporary situation of a sectarian Jewish community.

Feldman describes living with her grandparents who were both survivors of the Shoah and were part of the Satmar Community's first generation. When her parents divorced, she lived with her grandparents. Her mother left the family and the congregation when Deborah was still a toddler. Her father was mentally ill and not able to look after her. Feldman grew up with the stigma of her parents' divorce and illness. In her memoir, Feldman describes herself as a curious girl asking too many questions, longing for English books and other things considered "evil," forbidden and out of bounds in the Satmar community. She transgressed many rules and was harshly judged when she did not obey the regulations, for example, when she did not dress according to Jewish laws. At the same time, she wanted to be part of the community and craved her classmates' acceptance, for example by trying to redeem her family by finding a famous rabbi within her ancestry.

When she turned seventeen, she agreed to marry a young man chosen by her aunt. For girls in her community, the most prestigious choice in life was to be married to a pious husband. Feldman reports that through marriage, she hoped to gain more freedom, to find acceptance and gain a new reputation. Over the time of her engagement, she was showered with valuable presents like never before. Marriage, for her, held the promise of becoming a real adult.

Feldman detailed that only then was she introduced to all the religious laws a woman needs to obey when menstruating, so as to not soil her husband's ritual purity. She became acquainted with the fact that she had a vulva and a womb. She had never heard of either before, neither had she understood that the exit 'down there' was more than the way to urinate.

Feldman indicates that it was in fact after marriage, that her most challenging time began. Instead of enjoying her new freedom, she came under the obligation to conceive as soon as possible. When she could not fulfill her "marital duties", her husband and parents-in-law increased the pressure. Physical

and psychological coercion finally made her conceive. During these difficult times, she decided to take a writing class at Sarah Lawrence College, telling her husband she was going there to train as a secretary.

Feldman describes how she wanted to escape the Satmar Community before her son was introduced into the school system. She realized that she wanted another life for him as well as for herself. The contract to publish her memoir gave her the financial means to leave the Satmar community.

Having the financial means to support herself and her son helped her to leave. But she also needed all her mental and spiritual resources. Like in most sectarian communities, she would lose all support of her family and the community, because they would see her as having betrayed their faith, sullying the community.

In the following paragraphs, I will analyze the different God-images relevant to Feldman's experience: those religious images that helped her leave the community, and those that she had to fight.

IV. God-images and identity

It was William James (James 1952) who in his Edinburgh lectures in 1901 and 1902 opened up the possibility of scrutinizing God-images not according to their conformity to church dogmatism and other religious institutions but according to their meaning for the life of the believer. John Dewey (Dewey 1934) emphasized that human beliefs do not originate in the individual psyche alone but are also shaped by personal relationships and the social environment.

As a psychoanalyst, Ana-Maria Rizzuto (Rizzuto 1979) discerns that there are conscious God-representations closely linked to the teachings of the church or other religious institutions and unconscious God-representations that are closely linked to the sense of self. Rizzuto calls these representations the Living God because it is a part of our self-conception that permeates all our thoughts and actions, all that we do and cherish.

For Charles Taylor (Taylor 1989), these God-images and religious beliefs are not only ideas that we hold but are representations embedded in social practices. They shape values and forms of life. Taylor also situates the interpretation of rules within the practices incorporated in our bodies in the form of habits, dispositions, and tendencies.

Following these theoretical frameworks, you can identify at least three significant God-representations within the memoir of Feldman (Page numbers without an author indicated, refer to Feldman 2012).

1. Firstly, there is the Satmar Community that shapes the faith and life of all families and individuals. The God-image that the Rebbe sustains is that of a God taking revenge when not worshipped properly by his people (96). Every moment of the daily tasks is regulated by religious laws that everyone has to fulfill. According to the community's tradition, the laws are the way to stay among the Chosen Ones. In this world, education is more or less dispensable because it distracts people from staying true to their beliefs. School is less about education, and more about being shaped into an obedient part of the community, worshipping and living in the ways the community wants everyone to live. The God of the Satmar community is a very distant God, full of wrath and always threatening to take revenge if you do not submit to religious laws.
2. If it were only about the laws of the community, it might be easier to shake off this God-image, preached and drummed into every member. But it is more than that. Feldman points to the fact that her grandfather's God images were a way of dealing with his feelings of guilt. Feldman relates: "In small ways Zeidy cages himself, depriving himself of harmless joys, and yet it seems that every privation fulfills him... I think that pain makes Zeidy feel clean, purified" (42). Deborah's relationship to her grandfather may shape one part of her God-representation. She tries to obey the rules because she wants his praise and also wants to ease his mind (32). Feldman refers to her grandfather saying: "So often I wondered why I was allowed to live... But with time it became clear to me that all of my children and grandchildren had to be born, and it is my responsibility to make sure they grow up to be good Jews, Ehrliche Yidden, to give meaning to my survival" (43). As a good Jewish girl, Deborah helped him give meaning to his own survival (89).
3. There had to be another God-representation that gave Deborah the strength to endure and to have her own ideas, a God-representation that supported her and enabled her and be creative, to find a voice of her own.

Unlike the God-representations derived from the relation to her grandfather, there is also one

that has many traits of her connection to her grandmother "Bubby," especially when she is at home in her kitchen. Feldman writes: "Bubby's kitchen is like the center of the world. It is in this kitchen that I have always felt safe. From what I cannot articulate, except to say that in the kitchen I did not feel that familiar sense of being lost in a strange land, where no one knew who I was or what language I spoke. In the kitchen I felt like I had reached the place from where I came, and I never wanted to be pulled back into the chaos again" (11). According to Rizzuto, God-representations have their roots in pre-symbolic times, before representations were shaped by language. Sensations of early times are incorporated in the feelings and symbols that are the reservoir for the formation of God-representations. Feldman remembers the time with her grandmother in the kitchen. She retained positive memories that may be important for her helpful God-representation. As a girl, Deborah could prove herself useful in the kitchen, and even more, she could make her Bubby "shak[e] with laughter" (48). This was important because, at other times, her Bubby was not interested in the child Deborah at all. Feldman states, "It's almost as if she doesn't really want to get to know me for who I truly am. She's like that with everyone. I think it's because her whole family was murdered in the concentration camps, and she no longer has the energy to connect emotionally with people" (13).

Feldman refers to Bubby supporting Deborah in questioning the arguments of the Satmar community (96). "The first and greatest Satmar Rebbe said that if we become model Jews, just like in the olden days, then something like the Holocaust would never happen again, because God would be pleased with us." Bubby says it can happen again anyway. She says that people don't realize it, but stuff like the Holocaust had been happening to Jews for centuries, every fifty or so years. ... To think that we are in control is ridiculous, she says. But she doesn't say this in front of Zeidy, who believes the Satmar Rebbe can save us from anything" (96).

According to Feldman, Deborah could connect to her personal God in different ways: "Although I talk to God it is not through prayer. I talk to him in my mind, and even I will admit that I do not come to God humbly, as I should. I talk to him frankly, as I would to a friend, and I am con-



stantly asking him for favours. Still, I feel like God and I are on very good terms, relatively speaking” (31).

The girl Deborah dared to challenge her God: “If God thinks I am so evil, then let him punish me, I think spitefully, wondering what kind of response my provocative claim might elicit in heaven. Bring it on, I think, show me what you’ve got” (107).

V. The shaping of the body in the Satmar Community

In Deborah Feldman’s memoir, the female body and its shaping according to the Jewish rules and regulations are of utter importance. The shaping cannot be accomplished by regulations alone. It needs the consent of the women as well. This is what the theory of the Sociologist and Philosopher Frigga Haug (Haug 1983) helps us understand. According to her, women are not only passive victims of oppression, but they consent to their own abuse in many ways. With her method of ‘Erinnerungsarbeit’ (Dealing with memories), she developed a tool to unravel these entanglements.

According to Haug, if women discover that they take an active part in their suppression, they can break these bondages. Frigga Haug asked women in groups to write down stories of everyday life about body parts like feet, legs, or hair. At first, their stories do not seem to be of importance to the authors. But when the group discusses the narratives, they discover the gaps, the tacit agreements, and self-understood presuppositions that are implicit within.

In her book, “Un-Orthodox” Feldman works precisely in this way. She looked back on the way the Satmar Community shaped her mind and her body. With this, she distanced herself from the images she grew up with and freed herself from oppression. Feldman gives an example of “shaping the body” in school and how Deborah dealt with it: “I’ve forgotten to put a shirt under my sweater. There’s a new rule about no knits directly on the body. Now that we are growing up, my teachers say, we have to be careful to avoid clingy fabrics. I could get in trouble, but it is ten minutes to nine and if I leave now I’ll make it just in time” (30). But as soon as she enters the classroom, she writes ““You are not wearing a shirt under your sweater.” Mrs. Mouse barks at me. “Don’t even think about going to your desk. You

are going straight to the principal’s office””(32). The principal tells her: “Your teacher says you’re having a problem following the rules. I don’t understand why you can’t be like everyone else. No one seems to have any problem wearing shirts under their sweaters. Why do you?”” (33).

While eroticizing the female body, the community did not want girls and women to know anything about their bodies and sexuality. As a child, Deborah asked her grandmother: “Bubby, what is a virgin?” – finding this word written on an olive oil container. Her grandmother was shocked and replied: “Well, it’s not a word for little girls to know” (24).

Feldman retells a story of resistance that her grandmother told her when she, Bubby had been married for two years. Her husband wanted her to shave off all her hair, because the rabbi had said so. “Husband of mine” she retorted indignantly “you went crazy in the head or what? It’s not enough for you that I cover my hair with a wig, even when my mother didn’t bother back in Europe, but now you want me to shave it all too? Never in my life did I hear of such frumkeit, of such a religion, that says a woman has to shave her head” (24). Her husband told her, that he would be embarrassed in front of the rabbi and the other men if she did not oblige and that she would bring shame over the whole family. Finally, she gave in.

When telling Deborah about it, she played down her surrender, saying: “The shaving you think was such a big deal? Not a big deal at all. I got used to it so fast. And honestly, it is much more comfortable, especially in summer” (25). So even her story of resistance became a lesson in the female role of subordination.

According to Feldman, women were not to know anything about their bodies, female or male sexual organs, and sexuality at all. Only when being engaged to marry, did this change completely. Young brides were told in marriage classes what they needed to know. Until then, everyone had told Deborah, that they were spiritual beings, and their bodies only necessary for carrying the soul. All of a sudden, it was all about her body and its functions (153).

Feldman tells the story about Deborah and the other brides when the marriage teacher said to them, that men and women’s bodies were created like two interlocking puzzle pieces and that the female body has a hallway with walls leading to a little door, which opens to a womb. Deborah tries to figure out where this hallway and the opening could be located

in her body. She decides that it cannot be the hole where the pee comes out because that is not that stretchy. She interrupts her teacher, saying: "I don't have that." The marriage teacher is nonplussed: "Of course you do. Everyone has." Deborah retorted: "I don't have the thing that you're talking about. I think I was born without it. How could I have something like that and not know about it?" (152). Feldman remembers the girl Deborah became angry later and felt betrayed: "How could something supposedly so important have been hidden from me all these years? Why was I now being forced abruptly to acknowledge it? Did that mean that until now it had not been okay to have a mekor (a womb), but now that I was getting married, it could make its great entrance, suddenly 'holy?'" (153)

Feldman also concedes, that the young bride Deborah wanted the wedding to become a success. But all her good intentions did not work. After the wedding ceremony, when the couple was to "consummate the marriage," they could not have intercourse. Deborah's body did not oblige to the purpose intended by the Satmar community. For a whole year she was not able to conceive. The family went through all expenses trying to find the problem and fix it. They paid doctors and therapists to deal with Deborah's problem – because, for them, it was her fault alone. The solution was quite a mechanical one. She had to expand her vagina so that the other puzzle piece fitted in.

Feldman reports that the time before she conceived was very painful. Bodily anxieties and panic attacks plagued her. She lost all the self-confidence she had. She realized that the state of marriage did not fulfill the hopes that she had set upon it. Marriage did not help her erase the shame that she carried, nor did her family have any reason to be proud of her. She did not have a husband to team up with to gain more freedom. All the concessions she made had not helped her to fit in.

VI. Threatening and supportive God-representations and body images

Feldman related that it was the conception of her child that gave her more freedom and a new power to pursue her goals. Being pregnant, she coaxed her husband into leaving Williamsburg and allowing her take driving lessons (191).

The author also describes that when giving birth, Deborah finds labor as the most powerful experi-

ence, especially when bearing down for the last time and releasing her son. "I felt as much alive as never felt before" (209). According to Feldman, this experience served for Deborah as a wakeup call and made her fight again. She decided to use birth control and not to go to the mikwa again but fake it. She knew well that the Torah condemned women like her: "It calls me a Jezebel, a truly evil seductress, dragging my husband into sin with me" (220 f) – because her husband had intercourse with a woman not purified by the mikwa.

According to Feldman, Deborah slowly changed her dressing style and her perspective on life during her college years but still waited for 'a sign' to leave the community permanently. To Deborah, this sign came with a serious car accident she had. She remembered one thought when being sure that she would die: "There really is a God, and he is punishing me" (242). Lying in the hospital, she tried to give a meaning to what had happened to her. "That something like this should happen to me, only a few days before I am supposed to leave my past behind for good, only makes sense if it were meant to stop me from doing so. Is it meant to scare me back into obedience?" (243).

Here the wrathful God of the Satmar Community tried to take revenge for all that she did and for her disobedience. But interestingly, at the same time her body made a contradictory statement. Feldman reports that after the thought of being punished, Deborah has another sensation: "I look down at my body and marvel at its ability to survive something so frightening, and I gaze lingeringly at my limbs as if there were magic blood coursing in my veins. How extraordinary it is, to be alive when one should be dead" (243).

For Deborah the car accident is open to two different interpretations. It is the wrath of the revengeful God that she did not obey, or it is the demonstration of her body's power to prevail, even an accident like this. She decides to believe in the message of her bodily experience of power. She leaves her husband and the Satmar community to live a life of her own with her son in Manhattan.

Her later books and also the documentary #female pleasure (Miller 2019) show that leaving the Satmar community was only the beginning of Deborah's journey. For a long time, she searched for a new identity and a new place to live. Finally, she found it in Berlin, Germany, where many outcasts from different contexts gather, support each other, and forge new ties, for example, through art.



VII. Conclusion

De-Colonial Theory focusses on the colonial structures that are still valid in different countries, even if the time of Colonial Empires is supposedly over. People still suffer from the consequences of colonialization not only in the Global South but also in the Global North where survivors of different forms of colonialization have tried to find refuge.

In the Global South and North, different structures of oppression like racism and sexism in their various shapes, are still in place. Asking “Can the Subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1994, 66), Spivak emphasizes that, especially for women, oppression works in intersectional ways. Women suffer suppression not only because of their gender but also because they are part of an underprivileged group. These groups of subalterns have no right to speak and their voice is not heard. Deborah suffers from an intersectional suppression being a woman in a sectarian misogynic faith community and being the offspring of parents disrespected in the Satmar community.

In her memoir, Deborah Feldman demonstrates that oppressive structures of a sectarian community where religion, tradition, a charismatic leader, and US-Legislation come together to hinder women and children from finding their voices.

With the methods of Ana-Maria Rizzuto’s Psychoanalysis and Frigga Haug’s ‘Erinnerungsarbeit,’ I showed that for Deborah, these repressive structures of God-images, self-images and body images worked to reinforce each other. Strengthening and supportive God-images and self-images helped Deborah to question the body images instilled by this sectarian community.

There is no simple answer to the question, why Deborah Feldman succeeded in leaving this community, while many others tried to break free but finally were lured back into the old structures (conf. Abraham, 1995). Retracing Deborah’s sources of strength and endurance is akin to a single case study. It helps to understand more of the intersectional realities of suppression but does not offer simple solutions.

Feldman’s courage and resilience made it possible for her to write her memoir and to leave the sectarian community. It may also help other women to find their own voice. But the memoir does not change the oppressive structures, nor was it written with this intention. There are other ways of working for change and liberation of oppressive systems: The political road of governmental and non-governmen-

tal organizations, the pedagogical approaches that Catherine Walsh (Mignolo/Walsh) proposes, but also the artistic way that Deborah Feldman and other women in the documentary ‘#female pleasure’ use when they tell their stories of liberation.

For me, ‘#Female Pleasure’ points to an artistic method and towards postcolonial liberation. To me this documentary is an example of ‘Artistic research’ (Kiljunen/Hannula 2002), a research that tool like other research is a “creative systematic activity undertaken to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society” (OECD Glossary of statistical Terms, 2008).

The courage and creativity these women show, are an asset to the postcolonial movement. These women’s laughter is contagious and life-giving, though they all endured difficult times. To me, this may be a unique approach of divesting and destabilizing postcolonial structures and showing new perspectives and ways of overcoming intersectional hindrances that women have to suffer.

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