

Disobedience: from Isolation to Solidarity

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Introduction

Disobedience is a novel which contains various and broad issues which include the fundamental problems of ultra-Orthodox Judaism with the Jewish Bible, which is called Torah, along with Jewish culture, family relations, community, based on its heterosexism. All of these things work through the human relationships in this novel. Lesbianism is the central issue in this novel. Especially the relationship between Ronit and Esti. In 2017, this novel was adapted to a movie with the same title, *Disobedience*, directed by Sebastian Lelio. According to the online official website, “*Disobedience* follows a woman as she returns to the community that shunned her decades earlier for an attraction to a childhood friend. Once back, their passions reignite as they explore the boundaries of faith and sexuality.” Interestingly, the film title in Japanese edition is *Ronit and Esti*. These sources provide the concern over *Disobedience* as a lesbian story in the movie, too. However, Elena Seymenliyska clearly says in her reviews that “Yet while Alderman skilfully alternates between Ronit's sassy voice and Esti's more guarded perspective, she ends with a theatrical show-down too hackneyed for the book's disobedient ethos.”

There is no doubt that the relationship between Ronit and Esti is given an important perspective in this book. Although many readers and viewers have maintained continuous interest in the process of how they seek actions from the exclusively conservative community, little attention has been paid to explore other relationships between Dovid and Esti, Rav Krushka and Dovid. This chapter mentions the various relations and tries to prove how strict and exclusive the ultra-orthodox Jewish community is, and how Alderman constructs the complexly of human relations in the local and specific place, which is Hendon in England, and examines the key words, which are “occlusion,” “isolation,” and “solidarity,” and points out the relations of individuals to the whole.

1. Occlusion

Orthodox Judaism is deeply spatial. It requires that its members

live in accordance with Halakha (Jewish law), the dominant protocol determining Jewish ritual and translation of the commandments into many aspects of day-to-day living. The strict orthodox Jewish (Haredi) community comprises many sects whose communal identity plays a central role in everyday life and spatial organisation. (Ashery 1)

In *Spatial Behavior in Haredi Jewish Communities in Great Britain* (2019), the author, Shlomit Flint Ashery, discusses the ultra-Orthodox Judaism from the perspective of an exclusive community. In her work, the word “spatial” means close relations in a specific community. Alderman also depicts the confined Jewish community in Hendon with its strict elements from the first chapter in *Disobedience*.

One element is seen in the description of synagogue which is the building where a Jewish assemblies or congregations take place for religious observance and instructions. “On this sultry, overripe September day, with the windows closed and sweat beading on the brow of every member of the congregation, the Rav [Krushka], leaning on the arm of his nephew Dovid, was wrapped in a woolen overcoat (*Disobedience* 1).” It shows that this synagogue is a closed space and the suffocating and stifling condition that the windows are kept shut and of sweating can be viewed as the expressions of the closed image. Isolating the synagogue from the outside air, also reflects the exclusion of the non-Jewish community or society such as other religious, secular people, sexual diversity, and the public as a whole. The factor of the occlusal community also appears noticeably in the verb “wrapped” in this quotation. *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter referred to as *OED*) defines “wrap” as follows: “To involve, environ, or entangled (a person, etc.) in something that impedes movement or restricts liberty; to catch in this way. Chiefly in passive. Also with in, Obsolete (*OED*).” Therefore, Rav Kurushka’s woolen overcoat connotes his restricted movements and freedom in the Jewish community, and it establishes the physically binding image of it.

The presence of the congregations turns out to be another element which is closely connected with Torah, the Jewish bible that is the first five books of the *Old Testament* and also called the Five Books of Moses. Shari Reiss indicates that studying Torah is a method of promoting religious engagement, and it makes various relations: family, friend or community

(Reiss 10). Within the relationships of Jewish community, Torah is regarded as important to constitute a common consciousness, mutual understanding, and a communal society of Torah. Alderman reveals this connection as Reiss points out. “The congregation could not believe that Rav Krushka could succumb to a shadow – he from whom the light of Torah seemed to shine so brightly that they felt themselves illuminated by his presence (2).” Rav Krushka who is the leader of this Jewish community has enormous authority. Congregations submit blindly to Rav’s authority. Still, Jewish believers induces a problem that they do not have their own will; Rav’s voice as the will of Hashem is the only guiding principle of their daily living. They identify Rav with Torah and deify him because Rav’s presence is regarded as credible as the will of Hashem. Hence, they unconsciously refuse every influence from the external world and continue to believe the only deified presence of the community, and therefore they have kept creating the occlusion.

2. Isolation

From the above, how the Jewish community attaches great importance to communitarianism is revealed. But the main characters, Dovid and Esti, cannot bear this consciousness of community and isolate themselves from their community. The shared sense of isolation between Dovid and Esti in terms of religious roles is going to be discussed.

As a rabbi, Dovid is isolated in spite of his ruling position. As a successor, he is not highly evaluated because “[...] he [Dovid] had none of the Rav’s spirit, none of his fire [...]. He was ‘Dovid’, or sometimes, simply, ‘that nephew of the Rav, that assistant’ (3).” He is appointed as a legitimate rabbi, but to achieve the title of “Rav,” the absolute leadership of Jewish community including other rabbis and congregations contain with recognition and respect from all the members. Elliot Stevens points out today’s rabbi that;

Unlike workers in other trained fields the rabbi has unfortunately no clear, defined sphere of activities upon which to base his authority. [. . .] In those functions where he seems to be exercising an old prerogative of his own as, for example, in preaching, he is too often merely the echo of these professionals. [. . .] Thus, lacking a special function, he has no authority of

a special character that gives him warrant to speak to and for the Jews.
(Stevens 37)

Steven's indication is akin to the assessments of Dovid as a rabbi. Following Steven's assertion and congregations' negative images, Dovid is a mere rabbi as an "ornament." But he is necessary for congregations to be inaugurated as the top of it in token of the heir. He is gone to the State of Israel, which is the Holy Land of Judaism, to study abroad when he is eighteen years old by the will of Rav Krushka and Judaists. They expect him to receive great education from studying Torah. "Hartog [one of rabbis in Hendon] smiled again. "We need you," he said, "the community needs you. You were at the Rav's right hand. You will not, obviously, be the Rav. But the community needs order, continuity. [. . .] We have, after all, provided your education for this purpose, Dovid (197)." The community's motive that it regards him just as someone who takes "a hereditary post" rather than the supreme leader is evident here. Thence, Dovid is not so much a rabbi like an ideal leader as a competent rabbi adapt from the kinship with the predecessor and his academic career in the State of Israel. His statement can be described by Jungian term "persona." It "is the actor's mask that we show to the world-it is our social personality, a personality that is sometimes quite different from our true self. (Guerin 206)" Therefore, He is just convenient replacement to carry out required religious roles, and these circumstances give him humiliation and isolation.

In the case of Esti, she feels isolated when she attends to the religious observance, mikvah, which means "ritual bath" for purification. According to *Jewish Virtual Library*, "Today the chief use of the mikveh is for women, prior to marriage, following niddut [Jewish law], and following the birth of a child [...]. Mikveh immersion is also obligatory for converts, as part of the ceremony of conversion." In *Disobedience*, Esti performs this rite when Rav Krushka's burial service is conducted.

She found herself packing her things for the mikvah, just as she had planned. She felt oddly proud that her actions continued on their intended path, even though she had not willed them. She felt it boded well. Nothing had changed, the pattern of her life remained the same. This indicated that nothing need change. Like any normal woman, she was preparing

herself to return to her husband's bed. [underlines mine] (21)

The first underlined part indicates that, she understands the necessary procedures to perform mikveh, and here she seems to make moves mechanically. She is, so to speak, putting on the mask of a religious believer. According to psychology of Jung, she takes a disguise of "persona." She tries to be a Judaist, betraying her real mind. From the second underlined part, Esti secretly shows her disobedience to the practice of the service. She is an amphibious woman; one side of her is a Judaist and the other side is Esti in her conscious. She undergoes the change of her conscious from her social "self" to "ego" through the Jewish services, yet when she says, "nothing need change," her acceptance of the status quo is revealed. In other words, she gives up in order to maintain her own self. Also, she understands that she is an untraditional because, in this Jewish community, Judaists who obey all Jewish commandment, custom, and culture, are in the mainstream. Eventually, she is an isolated because she senses that, she is a discord and that is the very reason why she puts on the "persona" to live with the situation trying to comply with the religious codes.

In this way, it is revealed how Dovid and Esti try to integrate their identity into the Jewish community. Isolation is something they have in common with each other, but they are not able to own it to each other even if they are husband and wife as they do not have built up the psychological nexus. Their mutual isolation makes each of them remain silent to each other as well as to the community. Although they do not achieve decent verbal communication nearly towards the end of the novel.

When Dovid was eighteen years old, he was given an ideal image of his future wife by Rav Krushka as "No one too noisy, not one of these chatterers (149)." As mentioned earlier, Dovid has no strong leadership nor authority, a sign of masculinity in the Jewish community. As shown by Rav's suggestion, it can be seen clearly in their community that men are expected to reign over women. Esti was chosen for Dovid's wife as she meets the conditions of a good Jewish wife. The marriage relationship entails strict gender tradition in Judaism. However, they eventually choose to live in another Jewish community which respects their own individualities which is evident in the following;

Dovid is the Rabbi now, although he does not enjoy the title. “Call me Dovid,” he says to the people who visit his house. [. . .] They come, sometimes, to see his wife [Esti] rather than him. She is known as a good listener; no problem is too great for her ears, no trouble too shocking. (252)

This ideal lifestyle for them is consummated by their conversation, resulting in their “self-awareness” and “solidarity.”

3. Self-awareness

The community regards that Esti is a dangerous person because she is bisexual and still has sexual relations with Ronit. One of the rabbis, Dr. Hartog, requests Dovid to expel Esti from the community. This causes Dovid strong disgust for the community; “He thought. I will lose her. If you make me do this thing I will lose her. She will not return, whether you send her away or not. He thought, this place kills women [...]. [underlines mine] (198).” The main point of his remark is to reassure himself that the Jewish community is even more male-oriented than elsewhere. The Jewish community has the double standard between men and women.

As mentioned earlier, the community needs him who has no enthusiasm for Judaism. It makes Dovid gain a lot of religious experiences. But in the case of women, behaviors against conservative Zionist creed tend to subject to punishment and exclusion. For instance, the community makes Ronit leave Hendon due to her sexual relationship with Esti, and Esti is also about to get the same punishment by the community. The opinion of Dovid as a rabbi is respected by all means because he is a man with a good religious background. However, the fact that even if a wife is condemned has nothing to do with her husband shows the strong reflection of the community’s masculinism.

Unlike Dovid who comes to realize that he is protected by the community because he is a man and above all a rabbi, and yet Dovid can not disobey the order to expel Esti since he has no courage nor authority. We can see a new Esti who is struggling with dilemma and confrontation between her own self and ego:

She said, “What you saw, yesterday. Me and Ronit, what you

saw . . .”

She stopped there. Love urged her to remain silent. Love is a secret thing, a hidden thing. It feeds in dark places. She said to her heart, I am tired of you. Her heart said, if you say this you will never be able to go back. [underlines mine] (218)

The conflict between self and ego within Esti is seen in this quotation. The underlined sentence shows Esti’s outspoken, honest inner voice which tells her real feelings towards Dovid. But her sense of propriety, persona, so to speak, does not allow her to take action and keeps her silent according to the community norms. Esti keeps silent and yields to the community rules. Although she apparently remains what she should be, she continues to have conversation with Dovid.

She said, “It began when we were schoolgirls. Before I ever knew you.”
[. .]

He said, “Have you thought all this time that I didn’t know?” [. .]

He said, “Since before we were married, I think. In a way. Not completely.”

She said, “Then, why?”

He said, “I just. I didn’t want you to shrink like this. I thought I could keep you safe. I was wrong. I’m sorry. [. .] If you want to go, I won’t try to stop you. [. .] I don’t want you to stay if you want to go. [underlines mine] (219-220)

Unlike her usual self she emerges actively in this conversation, and also unlike his usual self Dovid talks passively. In isolation, it is clear that she gives up disobeying to the Jewish norms. The results so far are, according to Jungian terms, that two aspects of her consciousness are showing up here. In addition to this, she unconsciously takes initiative, that is, her “animus” appears when she represses her “persona,” and at the same time, she gains her fundamental ambition of seeking a change. Her self, which is the factor that promoted the appearance of the animus, can be explained in more detail by using Jung’s “shadow.” Wilfred Guerin refers to it in this way; “The shadow is the darker side of our unconscious self, the inferior and less pleasing aspects of the personality, which we wish to suppress. (Guerin 205)” Her desperation in her confrontation with the

emotional conflict makes her speak out, and she fully understands that what she thinks inwardly is unacceptable to the Jewish community. In addition, Jung designates the importance of facing “shadow;”

This confrontation [with shadow] is the first test of courage on the inner way [...] for the meeting with ourselves belongs to the more unpleasant things that can be avoided so long as we can project everything negative into the environment. But if we are able to see our own shadow and can bear knowing about it, then a small part of the problem has already been solved: we have at least brought up the personal unconscious (Jung 20).

Esti understands that her insistence does not comply with the modesty as a Jewish wife, and she feigns and exploits these aspects to save her position and respectability. Thus, she becomes able to go from isolation to liberation by facing the socialized self and the oppressed self.

The change of Dovid is also clarified by facing his “shadow.” When Dovid is told to banish Esti, he thinks; “I will lose her. If you make me do this thing I will lose her. She will not return, whether you send her away or not. He thought, this place kills women [...] [underlines mine] (198).” At this time, he blames the community for causing her humiliation and pains. But in their conversation, Dovid recognizes the fact that it is he that restricts and kills Esti by saving her in the position of rabbi’s wife. His awareness can be explained by the Jungian term “shadow” in the same way as Esti. Almost all the people usually reflect their shadow in others, and consequently Dovid determines that the community is the very cause of Esti’s suffering. However, he cognizes the fact that the cause of Esti’s torment is paradoxically the result of his protection in their conversation. From these results, the conversation indicates that Esti and Dovid have come to cognize their own selves. Moreover, they have found that their marriage actually has brought them the most rewarding unity of human relationship.

4. Solidarity

To find solidarity between Dovid and Esti, we need to mention the usage of “pregnant” and “hand.” In their relationship, pregnancy is not used as a result of physical consummation.

When Esti tells Dovid that she is pregnant, it should be noted that she chooses the collective pronoun “we,” signifying their marital bond, “We are pregnant (220).” “Pregnant” is used for females in general, but the intention of Esti here is that she includes Dovid for the childbearing as their joint achievement. The conversation of Ronit and Esti shows the different views of marriage as follows:

I [Ronit] said, “Esti, why did you marry him [Dovid]?”

She [Esti] said, “You were gone.”

“I was gone so you, what, jumped on the nearest available body?” [. . .]

“That’s not. It’s not. [. . .] (209)

Ronit's remarks suggest that marriage and sex have a complimentary relationship. However, Esti asserts that it is not necessarily meant only for the physical relationship, either in the past or in the present. It can be presumed from Esti's view that she may have sought a mental attachment and therefore has used the word, "pregnant" as a symbol of marital unity. *OED* defines “pregnant” as follows: “Full of meaning, highly significant; suggestive, implying more than is obvious or stated.” Hence, Esti uses "pregnant" to mean that they have become one as a couple.

In Disobedience, Alderman is symbolically adopted the power of speech imbedded in Esti and Dovid's speech. As aforementioned, they can't give a candid account of the facts because ultra-Orthodox Judaism requires them subdued practices of rigorous religious disciplines. Yet, they surmount their personas by clasping each other's hands. “For, as Dovid walked on to the stage, he was accompanied by his wife. They were holding hands. Dovid's right hand in Esti's left. In the instant it took every eye to swivel, those linked hands were the only important feature in the room [underlines mine] (*Disobedience* 243).” In this scene, the narrator emphasizes the act of holding hands and also gives an eye to “right” and “left” in the underlined part above. According to *Jewish Virtual Library*, “right” and “left” are “basically fourfold: right as opposed to left; directions (cardinal points); strength and weakness; merism.” Adopting the definition of strength and weakness, this position implies the power balance of Dovid to strength and Esti to weakness. In the social position of Dovid, it covertly explains the reason why he has been received with reverence in the community. And in

the case of Esti, the community's persistent male-chauvinism does not appreciate Esti. The question remains unanswered whether women are weaker than men from the position of their hands after all, though Esti has led the conversation and has controlled the speech.

Surely, in addition to focusing on the position of hands, focusing on their standing positions, the significance of Esti on the right side and Dovid on the opposite side, can suggest the power balance of them as Esti to strength and Dovid to weakness, that is, the reversal of the power balance between them. It is worth mentioning as a manifestation of Dovid's anima and Esti's animus. From Jungian psychoanalysis, Dovid's anima reveals as modesty and Esti's animus as leadership. In spite of the enduring discriminatory system of the Jewish patriarchal society, their power relations sway in favor of Esti. Thus, interlinked hands show their dispositions in unconsciousness, and both of them taste strength and weakness socially and personally.

Jewish Virtual Library also mentions "merism" in the definition of "right and left," which gives a clue to the findings of the unity. "Merism" is usually defined as "A form of synecdoche in which two (or in early use sometimes more) contrasting or complementary parts are made to represent the whole; an instance of this (*OED*)." The examples of merism are as follows: young and old or rich and poor means "people", and evening and morning means "a day" in the bible. Thus, merism can make the form of the term which is interlinked by the opposite meanings. By applying the methods of merism to the hands of Esti and Dovid, the term "hand" fulfils the vital role to unite individuals in order to form a couple. Moreover, "holding hands" connects Esti and Dovid and encourage them to take actions, something that could not be done alone. Consequently, their interlinked hands as an expression of their wills enable them to create power to disobey to their duties as a woman, a man, and a Judaist.

After their speech, they decide to move from the original Jewish community to a new one. This means that they have made a choice without abandoning Judaism. Their newly acquired power of speech shows that they can face not only their fears of free speech but also the control of the Jewish powerful doctrines of Torah. In the first chapter of *Disobedience*, Rav Krushka has mentioned the speech; "Our words are more than empty breath, but they are not Torah. Torah contains the world. Torah is the world.

Do not forget, my children, that all of our words, all of our stories, can only, at best, amount to a commentary on a single verse of the Torah (8).” Rav Krushka claims the ultimate power and truth of the Jewish Logos, saying that that people's words are not as influential as the Bible and are limited in the power of communication, which is only viable to try to convey a part of the words of the Jewish Bible. Logos, in Jungian concept, means “animus,” according to *OED*; “the principle of reason and judgement.” Therefore, it is taken internally as Esti's unconscious masculinity, and triggers off her power of speech. For example, Esti and Dovid have construed the speech as: “Our words are powerful. Our words are real. [. . .] We must be sure that we use them, like the Almighty, to create and not to destroy. (246)” Their understanding is that speech is not a gift for conveying logos, The Voice of God, but their own gift of free speech and their own creation not being bound by the doctrines of the Jewish Bible, Torah. This paper has considered that they have achieved two things with their words: self-awareness and unity. Instead of denying Judaism, they have chosen to live in harmony with their selves, their spouse, and Judaism achieving the power of speech as a meaning of expression and communication.

Conclusion

The narrator suggests the significance of disobedience as follows:

What is this thing, man-and-woman? It is a being with the power to disobey. Alone among all the creatures proceeding from the mouth of the Lord, human beings have freedom of will. We do not hear simply the pure voice of the Almighty as the angels do. We are not ruled by blind instinct like the beasts. Uniquely, we can listen to the commands of God, can understand them, yet can choose disobedience. It is this, and only this, which gives our obedience its value. (212-213)

“Pregnant” and “holding hands” leads to the conclusion that it supports to tie two different beings together and enables them to break their conventional persona by means of disobedience. In her dealing with gender issues, Alderman emphasizes the symbiosis of male and female and tries to reassure the reader that there is no doubt that holding hands can support to compose the unity of human beings with the support of verbal communication.

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