

Understanding Masculinity in *Tevye the Dairyman*

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I. Introduction

1. Literary Character Tevye and its Complexity

"Tevye is no woman."

Tevye, the narrator and protagonist of Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*, repetitively emphasizes his maleness throughout his monologue. The intention of this repetitive emphasis, however, seems to conceal his fragile inner sphere rather than on enhancing his strong masculine identity. What encircles his self-solidification is a sorrowful and disheartened male entity with jumbled thoughts.

"You can see that I tried to make light of it, though my heart was weeping inside me... Tevye kept a stiff upper lip..."¹

Contrary to his external shape, which Tevye tries to cover with sturdy and strong image, his inner sphere marks a feeble and sensitive state. His desired masculine notion seems to be threatened by a series of unexpected realities. The antinomic and unstable stance derived from the clash between desire and reality makes it hard to grasp a specific understanding of masculinity in the literary character, Tevye. This antinomic and unstable stance, thus, seems to be a reasonable ground for Tevye as an effeminate Jew, the stereotyped understanding of a Jewish male figure in European history.²

This brief research differs from seeing Tevye as an effeminate Jew. Rather, with a careful reading on Tevye and his characterization, I will try to capture a certain masculine image in *Tevye the Dairyman*. For this, I will delve into the masculine presentation of Tevye in search of its desired concept and actual appearance in reality.

II. Masculinity and its Presentation

1. Desired Masculinity

1.1 Educated Male

One salient male aspect of Tevye's desired identity can be observed in his attachment to "endless quotations from sacred Hebrew sources." His closeness to the

¹ Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, trans. by Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), 67.

² Paul Lerner, Benjamin Maria Baader, and Sharon Gillerman, "Introduction: German Jews, Gender, and History," in *German Jews, Gender, and History*, ed. by Paul Lerner, Benjamin Maria Baader, and Sharon Gillerman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1.

sacred Hebrew sources seems to perform a significant role in his male identity. As Halkin points out, Tevye's quotations, in fact, "seem not to be those of highly educated Jews and he does occasionally clown."³ However, his habitual reliance on sacred Hebrew sources in finding insights seems to be a reasonable evidence for his attachment to Jewish tradition, in which "Torah study played a central role in the construction of male gender identity."⁴

*Now Frume Soreh was standing in her place, and this is what she said to me: 'Reb Tevye! I've always thought you were a learned, honorable Jew...'*⁵

In the fictional dream story in the third chapter, Tevye presents himself as a learned, honorable Jew. Although it is not obvious what kind of education may signify 'a learned status' as such, Tevye draws a concept of 'education' in structuring 'a proper male image' that he wants to be. And it seems plausible to think that this 'education for a man,' has to do with the traditional Jewish education for males, the Torah study.

The properly educated state was the critical shift that undergirded the desired male identity in Tevye's mindset. Although, as we will discuss in following sections, this concept was threatened, conceded, and ignored by external forces, it was his attachment to the sacred Hebrew sources that aided him to break through numerous obstacles.

1.2 Father as a Final Arbiter

Along with the masculinity from the male gender perspective, his role in the patriarchal system is also significant in the understanding of the desired maleness. As was the typical presentation of a patriarch in Jewish society in the time of European Enlightenment, Tevye is presented as a chief decision-maker of a nuclear family.⁶

The idea that "the Jewish family was founded by an agreement between those regarded as the natural representatives of the couple, the parents,"⁷ is well preserved throughout matchmaking process. The first trial of matchmaking came from a butcher, *Layzer Wolf*. The butcher tries to contact no one but Tevye for the marriage with his daughter, *Tsaytl*. The butcher's effort to consult in one of the significant family events with Tevye implies a traditional patriarchal system in which the father gives a final sanction.⁸

³ Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman*, xxviii.

⁴ Iris Parush, "A Woman Prides Herself on Cooing and Prattling in French and German: The Secular Education of Women," in *Reading Jewish Women: Marginalization and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*, tr. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶ In the Jewish society at the end of middle ages, the property of family belonged to the father. And "the children were regarded as dependent on the will of the parents, particularly that of the father." See Jacob Katz, "The Family," in *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages* (New York: Schocken Books [1961] 1971), 135-36; Bartal points out that *maskilim*, who had been deprived of their ideal masculine status by the socioeconomic conditions, tried to restore male dominance over female. See Israel Bartal, "Virility and Impotence: from Traditional Society to the Haskalah," in *Brother Keepers: New Perspectives on Jewish Masculinity*, edited by Harry Brod and Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit (Harriman, TN: Men's Studies Press, 2010), 76-88.

⁷ Jacob Katz, "The Family," in *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, 137.

⁸ Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman*, 36.

The marriage of Tevye's youngest daughter, Beilke, has a similar pattern, where a matchmaker offers a match to Tevye. And this match is accomplished under the sanction of Tevye, the father of Beilke(102-03).

The father as a final arbiter in family structure seems to be another significant shift that constitutes the desired male identity of Tevye. The presentation of this idea is not generated as intact as expected in the actual Jewish tradition, but Tevye is still regarded as a patriarchal head who has a right to represent an important family affair.

2. Masculinity in the Real World

2.1 Challenged Educated Male

As mentioned in previous chapter, one of Tevye's salient habits is citing sacred Hebrew sources. This habitual citation is consistent throughout both monologues and dialogues, and shows his wit, admonishment, desperateness, anger, and emptiness. Quoting sacred Hebrew sources is Tevye's another self which cannot be separated from himself.

However, unlike its significant position in himself, Tevye's quoting habit is presented as trivial in the interaction with other characters. No one gives a serious attention to his meaningful addresses. Probably, his wife Golde's following response represents a general mood of all the entire characters toward his habit.

*It's just a sin to hand over a poor innocent beast to be slaughtered. Why it says in our holy Bible—"For goodness' sake, Tevye," she says, "that's enough! The whole world knows what a professor of Bible you are..."*⁹

Maybe, this kind of attitude toward his habit is bearable for him, because he seems not to be discouraged or disheartened by such responses and continues quoting sacred Hebrew sources throughout the story.

However, when it comes to the matters about his daughters, his desired concept of an educated man in Jewish written tradition stands more precariously. As he confronts undesirable matchmakings, his concern for the properly educated state of son-in-law candidate constantly decreases.

As we discussed in the previous chapter, the butcher's marriage request stimulated the undercurrent of Tevye's interests in learned state. This concern is once more clearly revealed in the second marriage affair of Tevye's daughter.

*A Jew who can't read a Jewish book is a hundred times worse than a sinner...*¹⁰

In the conversation of the matchmaker, what Tevye is most concerned about is how well his potential son-in-law is educated. This concern, however, is consistently challenged and discarded by Tevye's unwanted marriages of his daughters. He had to admit his daughters' marriages with a tailor, a young revolutionist, a non-Jewish priest, and a contractor, who are far from his desire of a properly educated state in Jewish written tradition. His notion of desired Jewish man seems to be threatened and to undergo

⁹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰ Ibid., 59.

a certain type of modification at the end. Concerning the marriage of his last daughter, Beilke, the conversation between Tevye and the matchmaker focuses only on the economic and social reputation of the potential son-in-law, omitting Tevye's concern in well educated Jewish man.

*"Do I have," says Efrayim, "the perfect match for your youngest daughter! He's a steal, a catch, a rare find, a colossus, a prince among men, a millionaire, a second Brodsky, a contractor named Podhotzur!"*¹¹

Unlike the first two marriages, Tevye, without hesitation, gives a sanction for this match offer. His quick acceptance for this last marriage offer makes it enough to assume that he, in some part of his notion on the desired maleness, gives a room for a different type of maleness in the transforming society. To some extent, Teve's notion of the desired man appears to be modified in the later phase of his life.

2.2 Threatened Patriarchal Hierarchy

The most striking fact to the patriarchal status of Tevye is how his daughters treated him in each marriage. His initial suggestions or admonishments for each marriage is lightly regarded and is discarded in most cases by each daughter. Except for Beilke,¹² every daughter accomplishes her own marriage will in opposition to that of Tevye. The highest position of patriarchal system is held by his daughters, not Tevye himself. The desired masculinity as a father holding a decisive right is weakened by this upside-down patriarchal hierarchy.

III. Conclusion: Tevye as a Tenacious Father with Loving Heart

In Tevye's life, the damaged desired masculinity, ironically, does not carry over into its total submission to reality. Tevye sometimes complains at his extreme misfortune and unfolds his feeble inner condition, but he never refused to be a father nor quit reliance on the sacred Hebrew sources. Like Job, a biblical character, in ashes, Tevye does not cease to be what he has been. As Job does not accept his wife's suggestion, "Curse God and die!," Tevye never escapes inhospitable reality.¹³

This tenacity in Tevye's characterization, with his inability to handle problems, magnifies the amount of harshness of reality that a man had to bear in his era. Masculinity emerges when this man denies not being himself in order to shun what he has to deal with. Tevye's maleness is revealed in the realistic presentation of a damaged but tenacious man in the time of socio-political chaos, not in the heroic presentation.

Probably, this masculine understanding reflected in Tevye is not merely restricted to characterize a certain gender perspective. Instead, it marks a sublime value of human being that is demanded, especially in the time of trouble.

¹¹Ibid., 101.

¹² Even Beilke takes opposition to Tevye when she defends her husband. Ibid., 113.

¹³ Joseph Sherman, "Holding Fast to Integrity: Shalom Rabinovich and Sholem Aleichem and Tevye the Dairyman," *Judaism* 43 no.1 (1994), 7.

A Significant question still remain; why does Tevye choose to let his desired masculinity be challenged and conceded, especially in his relationship with his daughters? Maybe, Tsaytl's entreaty to Tevye to forgive Chava gives a clue for these questions.

"...why don't you think of what you yourself have always told us about human beings loving and pitying each other as a father does his own child?"¹⁴

Tsaytl's entreaty reflects what she has learned from her father Tevye. It is "loving and pitying." Indeed, Tevye practices it throughout his life. Whenever he has a relationship with his daughters and other people, he does it truthfully with loving and pitying heart. This naive characteristic of Tevye is consistent throughout this story.

Probably, "loving and pitying" was a ground upon which his life was set up. And this ground appears to be a critical impetus that led Tevye to tenaciously retain his masculine identity as a father and educated Jewish male in the series of extreme difficulties.

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¹⁴ Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman*, 128.