

## Jewish Love in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Jewish-American Literature

Irada Ben Isaak  
Humboldt University Berlin

Contact: irad.ben.isaak@hu-berlin.de

### Abstract:

Naomi Seidman's book is an investigation of the love life of Jewish people in the 19th and early 20th century, specifically how it is reflected in the Jewish literature of that time. She looks at a large corpus of Yiddish, Hebrew, and Jewish-American novels and traces the processes of modernization, secularization, and Europeanization of Jewish literature and culture concerning romantic life.

### How to cite:

Ben Isaak, Irada: "Jewish Love in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Jewish-American Literature [Review on: Seidman, Naomi: *The Marriage Plot, Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature*, Stanford University Press, California, 2016.]". In: KULT\_online 55 (2018).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2018.211>



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Humboldt University Berlin

Seidman, Naomi: *The Marriage Plot, Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature*, Stanford University Press, California, 2016. 368 pages, 29.95 USD. ISBN: 9780804799676.

### **Abstract:**

Naomi Seidman's book is an investigation of the love life of Jewish people in the 19th and early 20th century, specifically how it is reflected in the Jewish literature of that time. She looks at a large corpus of Yiddish, Hebrew, and Jewish-American novels and traces the processes of modernization, secularization, and Europeanization of Jewish literature and culture concerning romantic life.

Naomi Seidman's book studies Jewish love life in the 19th and 20th century on the basis of Yiddish, Hebrew, and Jewish-American novels. It is a valuable study for all those interested in the intersection of Jewish Studies, Literary Studies, and Gender Studies. Seidman, an expert in Jewish literature, meticulously analyzes a wide selection of texts in order to discover patterns characteristic for the development of Jewish romantic life in the 19th and 20th century. The book is composed of six chapters. The first chapter is an overview of early (mid-19th century) Hebrew and Yiddish literature and culture concerning romantic life. The second one analyzes the custom of arranged marriage and the figure of the matchmaker. The third chapter discusses the meanings of lineage and kinship, whereas the fourth looks at how new gender roles and gender complementarity were constructed in Jewish literature. The fifth chapter questions the extent of change in the role of parents and close family members in choosing their children's partners. The last part examines the patterns of sexual segregation as represented in Jewish literatures.

Seidman's book has a strong critical value, as she questions common assumptions about a linear development of the emancipation of love. For example, Seidman discusses the very central figure of the matchmaker, or the 'marriage broker' and she observes a surprising shift in its literary representation: whereas early modern Jewish novels present the matchmaker as the ultimate enemy of a true love, in later novels it is described romantically and mysteriously as precisely the one who enables the

relationship to develop. Similarly, Seidman's arguments about sexual segregation and its influence on romantic life are convincing and thought-provoking. Here, she examines what is widely considered a particular feature of traditional Jewish society – the fact that boys and girls did not play, pray or study together, but spent most of their time separately. Seidman shows that sexual segregation of social spaces was not described in literature merely as an archaic custom that prevented young Jews from meeting one another and falling in love. Rather, sexual segregation created tension between the sexes, which in turn amplified the romantic moments. Furthermore, Seidman suggests, the creation of male-only spaces created ground for homosexual love.

The gender segregation and discrimination in Jewish Ashkenazi societies led also to the fact that most writers were men. Seidman discusses female writers such as Kadya Molodowsky (Yiddish) and Dvora Baron (Hebrew) and reflects how they wrote on relationships. She makes a valid case about gender differences in writing – while male Jewish writers criticized gender roles through irony and humor, female writers addressed the issue more directly and painfully.

When reading this rich study one needs however to keep in mind that it is written within the framework of Jewish Studies, and hence has specific scope. Being a Jewish Studies book, it makes very precise differentiations within Jewish literature, but it is not meant to be a book about European literature. Even after Seidman makes well thought-out geographic and periodic differentiations concerning Europe, European literature and culture may come across in the book as rather monolithic. It feels as if non-Jewish European cultures had already gone through the secularization and modernization of sexual life, and it was only the Jewish culture that was backward and needed to catch up. It could be argued that not only Jews, but also other European cultures have had continuous traditional and religious constraints on their love life, such as arranged or forced marriage exclusively to members of certain classes and races. One should take a closer look at the differences between intellectual circles and the lower classes, in both Jewish and 'European' societies. Looking at divides within European societies may bring up the observation that the 'European' societies were much less progressive than we might think, be it with regard to the divide between city and village, between rich and poor or secular and religious. Similarly, if we give greater focus to allied divides within Jewish European societies, we might get different insights – and we might need to include Jewish literature in more languages. If we want to take into consideration such divides in the Jewish context and see how class, secularization, and urbanization affect love, we should take into account that wealthy secular urban Jews were often assimilated and wrote in Christian European languages.

We also need to keep in mind the book's American focus. Choosing literature in Yiddish and Hebrew makes sense of course when studying Jewish literature. Choosing to focus on American-English

literature fits Seidman expertise and she deals with it fruitfully. But English-American Jewish literature is not necessarily more representative of Jewish literature than, for example, German, Russian or Polish or just contemporary Israeli literature, which might be seen as the most natural inheritor of 19th century Yiddish and Hebrew literature.

Regardless of the issues mentioned above, I believe that Seidman's book makes a meaningful and innovative argument. She succeeds in problematizing love in Jewish culture and depicting it as a phenomenon that has its own dynamic and takes hybrid forms between Jewish and European traditions and trends. Taking up her book, one could assume that it would draw a linear narrative of sexual emancipation overcoming all traditional and religious institutions and customs that were considered 'adversaries' of romantic love by the Jewish enlightenment movement. Surprisingly, Seidman shows in an array of literary examples how traditional institutions such as arranged marriage and sexual segregation were not described as in opposition to, but actually as boosters of romantic love and sexual tension.

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**German Abstract:**

**Jüdische Liebe in jiddischer, hebräischer und jüdisch-amerikanische Literatur**

Das Buch *The Marriage Plot, Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* von Naomi Seidman untersucht Formen jüdischer Liebe im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, insbesondere wie sie sich in der jüdischen Literatur dieser Zeit widerspiegeln. Seidman betrachtet eine große Anzahl jiddischer, hebräischer und jüdisch-amerikanischer Romane und analysiert die Prozesse der Modernisierung, Säkularisierung und Europäisierung jüdischer Literatur und Kultur.

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Irak Ben Isaak  
Humboldt University Berlin

Contact: [irad.ben.isaak@hu-berlin.de](mailto:irad.ben.isaak@hu-berlin.de)

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