

## 16. Dressing the American Jewish woman: Clothing, Gender, and the Limits of Assimilation in Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* and *The Rise of David Levinsky*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This essay reads Abraham Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) as novels in which the figure of the American Jewish woman is produced, contested, and made legible through dress. Criticism has long read Cahan through the lens of immigrant alienation and the gendered performance of Americanness; this essay argues that clothing is the medium through which that performance is most intimately staged on the female body. Building on Barbara A. Schreier's history of Jewish immigrant women's clothing, Anna Scacchi's account of the shawl's shifting cultural coding, Clay Motley's reading of gendered assimilation in *Yekl*, Donna Gabaccia's history of immigrant women, and theories of fashion and modernity from Elizabeth Wilson and the contributors to *The Cambridge Global History of Fashion*, the essay traces a single cultural logic across both novels: the discarding of Old World coverings—the *sheitel*, the kerchief, the shawl—and the assumption of structured, market-driven American dress. In *Yekl*, Gitl's wig becomes the battleground of her Americanization, yet she emerges with a dignity her assimilation-hungry husband never attains. In *Levinsky*, the women who embody modern femininity—Matilda, Dora, Anna Tevkin—are evaluated against the sacrificial, head-covered mother of the shtetl, while Levinsky grows rich manufacturing the very cloaks that clothe them. Read together, the two novels reveal that for the Jewish woman, becoming American was first, and most consequentially, a matter of what she wore—and that the garment promised a belonging it could never fully deliver.

**Keywords:** Abraham Cahan, dress, sheitel, shawl, Jewish American women, assimilation, gender, consumer culture, fashion and modernity

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## Amerikan Yahudi Kadınının Giydirmek: Abraham Cahan'ın *Yekl* ve *David Levinsky'nin Yükselişi* Romanlarında Giyim, Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Asimilasyonun Sınırları <sup>3</sup>

### Öz

Bu makale, Abraham Cahan'ın *Yekl: Bir New York Gettosu Hikâyesi* (1896) ve *David Levinsky'nin Yükselişi* (1917) adlı romanlarını, Amerikan Yahudi kadını figürünün giyim aracılığıyla üretildiği, tartışmaya açıldığı ve okunabilir kılındığı eserler olarak ele almaktadır. Eleştiri geleneği Cahan'ı uzun süredir göçmen yabancılaşması ve Amerikanlığın toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı performansı çerçevesinde okumuştur; bu makale ise giyimin, söz konusu performansın kadın bedeni üzerinde en mahrem biçimde sahnelendiği aracı olduğunu savunmaktadır. Barbara A. Schreier'in Yahudi göçmen kadın giyimi tarihine, Anna Scacchi'nin şalın değişen kültürel kodlanışına ilişkin çözümlemesine, Clay Motley'nin *Yekl*'deki toplumsal cinsiyetlenmiş asimilasyon okumasına, Donna Gabaccia'nın göçmen kadın tarihine ve Elizabeth Wilson ile *Cambridge Küresel Moda Tarihi* yazarlarının moda ve modernlik kuramlarına dayanan makale, her iki romanda da tek bir kültürel mantığı izler: Eski Dünya örtülerinin —*sheitel*, başörtüsü, şal— bir kenara bırakılması ve yapılandırılmış, piyasa odaklı Amerikan giyiminin benimsenmesi. *Yekl*'de Gitl'in peruğu Amerikanlaşmasının savaş alanına dönüşür; yine de o, asimilasyona aç kocasının asla erişemediği bir onurla ortaya çıkar. *Levinsky*'de modern kadınlığı temsil eden kadınlar —Matilda, Dora, Anna Tevkin— gettonun özverili, başı örtülü annesine karşı değerlendirilirken, Levinsky onları giydiren pelerinleri üreterek zenginleşir. Birlikte okunduğunda, iki roman Yahudi kadın için Amerikalı olmanın her şeyden önce ne giydiği meselesi olduğunu ve giysinin asla tam olarak sunamayacağı bir aidiyet vaat ettiğini ortaya koyar.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Abraham Cahan, giyim, sheitel, şal, Yahudi Amerikalı kadınlar, asimilasyon, toplumsal cinsiyet, tüketim kültürü, moda ve modernlik

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## Introduction

In the nineteenth century, clothing was never merely decorative. It functioned as a social language through which gender, class, and national belonging were negotiated and made visible. Elizabeth Wilson captures the stakes of this language precisely when she observes that “dress is the frontier between the self and the not-self” (Wilson, 2003, p. 15)—the membrane at which private identity meets public scrutiny. For the women among the Eastern European Jews who arrived in the United States in their millions between 1880 and the First World War, that frontier was anything but abstract. What a woman wore could signify refinement or backwardness, piety or vanity, foreignness or belonging; it could determine, at a glance, whether she was read as a “greenhorn” or as an American. To cross from one category to the other was, in the first instance, to change one’s clothes.

Historians of immigrant dress have shown how literally true this was. In her history of clothing and the Jewish immigrant experience, Barbara A. Schreier demonstrates that dress was the earliest and most immediate arena of Americanization: newcomers could appear American long before they could speak the language or navigate the culture, so that appearance preceded fluency as the first sign of belonging (Schreier, 1994, pp. 4–6). The discarding of the Old World wardrobe—the kerchief, the wig, the heavy shawl—registered what Schreier calls a changing consciousness, and dress became, in her account, a major emblem of assimilation (Schreier, 1994, pp. 9–11; see also Gordon, 1995, p. 118). Donna Gabaccia, surveying the broader history of immigrant women, adds an important qualification: women were frequently cast as the custodians of cultural continuity, their appearance scrutinized by reformers and by their own communities alike, so that a change of dress could read at once as aspiration and as betrayal (Gabaccia, 1994, pp. xi–xii). For the immigrant woman, the garment was never a neutral choice. It was a statement, and others were always reading it.

Abraham Cahan understood this with unusual clarity. The Lithuanian-born editor of the Yiddish *Forward* and the foremost literary chronicler of immigrant Jewish life, Cahan made dress a recurring instrument of characterization across his fiction. This essay argues that in his two major works—*Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917)—the figure of the American Jewish woman is produced and contested through clothing. The garment is not background detail but the very site where the drama of becoming American is enacted on the female body. In *Yekl*, the immigrant wife Gitl is shamed for the wig that marks her as a greenhorn, yet she ultimately emerges with a self-possession her assimilation-hungry husband never achieves. In *Levinsky*, the women who embody aspirational American femininity—Matilda, Dora, Anna Tevkin—are measured against the sacrificial, head-covered mother of the shtetl, even as the protagonist grows rich manufacturing the cloaks and suits that clothe the modern American woman. Reading the two novels together reveals a single cultural logic, and a single melancholy conclusion: for the Jewish woman, Americanization was first and most intimately a question of what she wore—and the garment, however eagerly assumed, promised a belonging it could never wholly confer.

The reading offered here builds on, and departs from, two established strands of Cahan criticism. The first, exemplified by the biographical-critical studies of Sanford E. Marovitz and Jules Chametzky, established Cahan as the great realist of immigrant ambivalence, the “Americanizer of the ghetto” who nonetheless chronicled the unhappiness that Americanization produced. The second, more recent strand—represented by Motley’s work on masculinity—has reframed assimilation in Cahan as a gendered performance, an anxious enactment of American manhood whose terms the immigrant could never quite master. This essay extends that gendered reading in a direction it has not been taken: from

the performance of manhood to the making of womanhood, and from the abstract notion of “performance” to the concrete, material, historically documented medium through which assimilation was most visibly performed—clothing. Where previous criticism has paraphrased Cahan’s scenes of dress, this essay returns to the specific texture of his prose—the fabrics, colors, and tailoring that he names—and reads that texture against the social history of immigrant dress reconstructed by Schreier and Gabaccia and the theory of fashion and modernity developed by Wilson and the historians of the Cambridge school. The aim is to show that the much-discussed “performance” of Americanness was, for Cahan’s women, a performance conducted in fabric.

The argument proceeds in four movements. The first turns to *Yekl* and the scandal of Gitl’s *sheitel*, reading the wig as the concentrated emblem of dress-as-assimilation and tracing the novella’s surprising reversal, in which the unfashionable wife outlasts her fashionable husband. The second situates *Levinsky* within the visual economy of modern fashion, showing how the decline of the shawl and the rise of the tailored cloak underwrite both Levinsky’s fortune and the remaking of American womanhood. The third reads the novel’s three central women as competing models of modern Jewish femininity, each defined against the maternal figure of the shtetl. The fourth draws the two novels together to argue that the Jewish woman’s passage into American modernity was registered, before anything else, on her clothed body.

### “They don’t wear wigs here”: The sheitel and the shaming of Gitl

The most concentrated image of dress as the battleground of Jewish women’s Americanization in Cahan’s fiction occurs in his first novel. *Yekl* follows the immigrant Yekl, who in three years on the Lower East Side has remade himself as “Jake,” a swaggering, secularized “Yankee” who shaves his beard, abandons his Jewish name, boasts of boxing and baseball, and frequents the dance halls, forever insisting on his own bravado—“dot’sh a kin’ a man I am!” (Cahan, 1896, p. 38). As Clay Motley argues, Cahan stages this self-fashioning as a fundamentally gendered performance. Jake labors to escape the period stereotype, widespread in both Gentile and Jewish culture, of the Jewish man as feminized, bookish, and “ruled by their women,” and to prove instead a manhood defined by freedom, aggression, and conspicuous success with women (Motley, 2011, pp. 7–9). Crucially, Motley notes, the novella treats both “Jewish” and “American” as performative categories enacted through “ritualized performances involving dress, diet, and other activities” (Motley, 2011, p. 5). Identity, in *Yekl*, is something one puts on. And what can be put on can be exposed.

Jake’s performance depends above all on his appearing single and unencumbered, and it collapses the moment his wife arrives from Russia. The reunion at the immigration shed is one of the most carefully observed scenes of dress in American immigrant fiction, and it rewards attention to its specific detail. Cahan does not merely report that Gitl looks foreign; he itemizes the garments that make her so. She is “slovenly dressed in a brown jacket and skirt of grotesque cut,” and her hair is “concealed under a voluminous wig of a pitch-black hue” that she had “put on just before leaving the steamer, both ‘in honour of the Sabbath’ and by way of sprucing herself up for the great event” (Cahan, 1896, p. 71). The gesture is one of love and piety. Jake reads it as catastrophe. The narrator lingers, with painful precision, on how the wig estranges her: it “made her seem stouter and as though shorter,” and it “added at least five years to her looks” (Cahan, 1896, p. 71). Most damningly, it marks her as ignorant of the new country’s codes, for in New York “none but an elderly matron may wear a wig without being the occasional target for snowballs or stones” (Cahan, 1896, p. 71). The *sheitel* that signified dignity in Antomir signifies only shame on the threshold of the city.

What makes the scene so devastating is the way Cahan routes the shame through Jake's averted eyes. Catching sight of Gitl through the railing of the detention shed, Jake "had averted his face, as if loth to rest his eyes on her," and "dared not even survey that crowd to see whether it contained any acquaintance of his" (Cahan, 1896, p. 72); he even "vaguely wished that her release were delayed indefinitely" (Cahan, 1896, p. 72). The wife's wig is experienced by the husband as a public exposure of his own unfinished Americanization: she wears the garment, but he suffers the disgrace. Here the structure of the gaze that this essay tracks across both novels is laid bare. Gitl's body is the surface on which the drama unfolds, but the eyes that judge it, and the anxiety that animates the judgment, belong to the man. Her appearance is, in the most literal sense, not her own affair; it is the screen of his social fear. Gabaccia's point that the immigrant woman's appearance was perpetually scrutinized, by reformers and by her own community alike (Gabaccia, 1994, pp. xi–xii), finds its sharpest fictional realization in this scene: the scrutiny is intimate, marital, and merciless, and it falls on the covered head.

This is exactly the cultural re-coding that Anna Scacchi traces in the history of the shawl. A garment's meaning, Scacchi shows, is not fixed in its fabric but assigned by the gaze that reads it: the shawl that once circulated as a broadly "democratic" garment, without strong ethnic connotation, was by the late nineteenth century re-coded as a marker of age, rurality, and immigrant difference (Scacchi, 2014, pp. 181–184). The *sheitel* undergoes the same transformation in miniature and at high speed: it does not change, but the country that reads it has. Cahan compresses the entire logic into a single line of dialogue. "They don't wear wigs here," Jake "ventured to add" when Gitl tries to embrace him, and when she offers in its place the silk "Saturday kerchief" she "bought at Kalmen's for a bargain," he tells her that "here one does not wear even a kerchief" (Cahan, 1896, pp. 73–74). The rebuke is a husband's to a wife, and it falls, in the first instance, on the woman's covered head. It is telling that Schreier borrowed this sentence precisely—"they don't wear wigs here"—to title her account of how the wig became the threshold garment of Jewish women's Americanization (Schreier, 1994, pp. 70–73; Gordon, 1995, p. 124).

What follows is a slow, painful unveiling, and Cahan stages it as a succession of garments. Behind a screen, so that "neither he nor any stranger could see her bareheaded," Gitl replaces the wig with the kerchief, emerging with "her hair and part of her forehead" hidden "under a kerchief of flaming blue and yellow, whose end dangled down her back" (Cahan, 1896, p. 74). The narrator concedes that the kerchief "had a rejuvenating effect," but Jake "thought that it made her look like an Italian woman of Mulberry Street on Sunday" and concludes "in despair" that "the wig would have been the lesser evil of the two" (Cahan, 1896, p. 74). Gitl's subsequent efforts are undertaken, as Motley emphasizes, to satisfy Jake's "Yankee feller" sensibilities rather than any desire of her own, and they leave her more alienated and confused than before (Motley, 2011, p. 13). The dynamic confirms Gabaccia's observation that immigrant women bore a disproportionate share of the symbolic labor of cultural negotiation, expected simultaneously to preserve tradition and to embody adaptation (Gabaccia, 1994, pp. 110–112). Gitl is caught in exactly this double bind: too Jewish for Jake, and not Jewish enough to be left in peace. The unveiling reaches its climax when her neighbor Mrs. Kavarsky, in what Cahan wryly titles a "coup d'état," physically tears the kerchief from Gitl's head and decrees that "from this day on there shall be no kerchief" (Cahan, 1896, p. 91)—the covering removed, finally, not by Gitl's choice but by another's hand.

Yet *Yekl* refuses the easy equation of unveiling with liberation, and this refusal is the source of its enduring power. The novella's great irony is that Gitl, not Jake, emerges with dignity. By the divorce proceedings, the once-derided greenhorn has shed her rustic manner and acquired a quiet self-confidence, without surrendering her inner Jewish self; she leaves with a settlement, a steadier suitor in the bookish Bernstein, and the prospect of a business of her own. Jake, by contrast, walks out of the



rabbi's house not a conqueror but, in the novella's memorable phrase, "the victim of an ignominious defeat" (Cahan, 1896, p. 89). Cahan makes the reversal explicit in Jake's own dawning awareness: he is "painfully reluctant to part with his long-coveted freedom so soon after it had at last been attained," and feels, "instead of a conqueror," that he has emerged "the victim of an ignominious defeat," while Gitl, Bernstein, and Mrs. Kavarsky celebrate "their victory" (Cahan, 1896, p. 89). As Motley reads it, Jake's status as a defeated victor lies at the very heart of Cahan's vision of assimilation: the immigrant's tie to a Jewish identity makes full Americanization impossible, even as the hunger for an American identity renders the traditional one unsatisfying (Motley, 2011, pp. 12–13).

The contrast between the two women in Jake's life sharpens the novella's argument about dress. If Gitl's *sheitel* marks her, in Jake's eyes, as hopelessly Old World, Mamie—the Polish-Jewish dance-hall habituée for whom he abandons his wife—represents the opposite danger: not too little Americanization but too much, and of the wrong, gaudy kind. Here again, Cahan's precision with garments does the analytic work. Mamie enters "preceded by a cloud of cologne odours" and "resplendent in a waist of blazing red, gaudily trimmed, and with puff sleeves," her head "surmounted with a whole forest of ostrich feathers," one "gloved" hand holding the "hoop-shaped yellowish handle of a blue parasol" (Cahan, 1896, p. 50). Every item advertises an Americanness that is itself a costume, an overdone performance of a lady. Her dress is as much a disguise as Jake's shaved beard; both mistake the surface of American identity for its substance. The novella thus stages three sartorial positions—Gitl's sincere but stigmatized *sheitel*, Mamie's brash and hollow display, and the quiet, negotiated middle path Gitl eventually finds—and it is only the last that the narrative endorses. Cahan's realism distrusts the garment that announces a wholesale transformation, whether that transformation is refused, as in the wig, or counterfeited, as in Mamie's finery. Dress that pretends the self can be exchanged is, for Cahan, always a kind of lie.

The gendered asymmetry of this outcome—Jake's defeat and Gitl's quiet self-possession—is the point. Jake stakes everything on the performance of an American identity and ends with neither identity intact; Gitl, who is shamed precisely for her clothing, adapts without self-erasure and ends with both her integrity and her prospects. Schreier's historical findings illuminate why this is plausible rather than sentimental. The relationship between Jewish immigrant women and American dress, she shows, was generally one of selective adaptation and negotiation rather than wholesale surrender; women calibrated what to keep and what to shed, layering the new wardrobe over a retained core (Schreier, 1994, pp. 50–58). Gitl enacts precisely this layered transformation. She does not abandon her identity so much as renegotiate its outward forms—which is to say she does, slowly and on her own terms, what Jake imagined could be done overnight by shaving a beard and changing a name. *Yekl* thus establishes the terms that *The Rise of David Levinsky* will elaborate on a far larger canvas: the American Jewish woman is made, unmade, and contested through her clothing, and the gaze that reads her garments—whether a husband's or, as we shall see, a manufacturer's—is never far away.

### From shawl to cloak: Levinsky and the manufacture of American womanhood

If *Yekl* dramatizes the shaming of the Old World garment, *The Rise of David Levinsky* places its protagonist at the industrial center of the system that produces the garment's replacement. Levinsky's rise is announced, in the novel's famous opening, as a passage measured in clothing and capital: "I came to America" with "four cents in my pocket," he reports, and is "now worth more than two million dollars and recognized as one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States" (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 3). His fortune is therefore inseparable from women's clothing. It is by producing

garments for the American woman that he accumulates his wealth; his rise is, quite literally, bound up with the sartorial modernization of the American female body. The novel that is so often read as a parable of capitalist alienation is also, and just as fundamentally, a novel about the manufacture of female appearance. Tellingly, even Levinsky's inner life is saturated with the trade: years into his success he confesses that the Talmudic intonation of his boyhood "still persists in my intonation even when I talk cloaks and bank accounts" (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 110)—the cloak now the very idiom of his Americanized self.

To grasp what Levinsky is selling, we must first understand what is being displaced. Scacchi's account of the shawl provides the long arc. Initially a relatively democratic garment that crossed class lines without strong ethnic connotation, the shawl gradually acquired, by the late nineteenth century, associations of age, rurality, and immigrant difference (Scacchi, 2014, pp. 181–183). What had once cloaked the women of the Republic without controversy became quietly marked as old-fashioned—the visual sign of a woman who had not yet, or would not, modernize. Schreier's reconstruction confirms the trajectory from the immigrants' own side: the heavy woven shawls so ubiquitous in Old World photographs had little place in America and were relegated to storage trunks, where many remained, folded and forgotten, for nearly a century (Schreier, 1994, pp. 62–65; Gordon, 1995, p. 134). The shawl that had been so much a part of a woman's persona was retired as the emblem of a self the immigrant was expected to leave behind.

When Levinsky enters the cloak trade, then, he enters not simply a marketplace but a visual economy structured by this evolving idea of femininity. Elizabeth Wilson's theory of fashion as a phenomenon of urban modernity clarifies the stakes. Fashion, Wilson argues, is bound up with the rise of the modern city and with the cultivation of individual identity; it is not static but depends on circulation, novelty, and visibility (Wilson, 2003, pp. 9–12). It is, she writes, "essential to the world of modernity," a means by which the individual stabilizes a self against the threat of anonymity in the urban crowd (Wilson, 2003, p. 24). If the traditional garment binds a woman to communal continuity, modern fashion situates her within the marketplace and the public sphere, where appearance must be continually produced and renewed. Levinsky becomes an agent of precisely this circulation. The industry in which he prospers does more than sell fabric; it manufactures appearances—and appearances, in the context of immigration and assimilation, carry an almost existential weight. Cahan renders the texture of that industry in loving technical detail: Levinsky recalls passing his evenings in "a cloak-makers' haunt, a café on Delancey Street," where he "never tired talking sleeves, capes, vents, and the like" (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 80)—the vocabulary of the female garment becomes the very grammar of his ambition.

The historians of fashion remind us, too, that this was a global and industrial transformation, not merely an American or aesthetic one. The contributors to *The Cambridge Global History of Fashion* insist that fashion must be understood within frameworks of industrial production, world trade, and the standardization of taste, as a system that organizes labor and capital as much as it organizes appearance (Breward et al., 2023, pp. 1–3). Levinsky, the Jewish immigrant entrepreneur, is an agent within exactly this expanding network. The cloak he ships to department stores and middle-class parlors is a node in a system that links the cutting-room floor of the Lower East Side to the boulevards of the modern city. That a recent immigrant, barred by his origins from full social acceptance, should become a manufacturer of the nation's feminine appearance is one of the novel's sustaining ironies: the makers of modern American womanhood are themselves positioned at its margins.

For Jewish immigrant women, the shift from shawl to fashionable dress was experienced as both

opportunity and discipline. Schreier records how young, unmarried working women—many employed in the garment trade itself, and so unusually literate in its codes—became passionate participants in American fashion, “putting on the style” so conspicuously that they drew criticism for overdressing in both the English and the Yiddish press (Schreier, 1994, pp. 90–96; Gordon, 1995, p. 125). Dress, in this account, became a primary vehicle of Americanization: as Andrew Heinze argues in the study Schreier draws upon, Jews linked consumption with freedom, democracy, and a new beginning, and Americanized with exceptional speed in part through their embrace of consumer goods (Heinze, 1990, pp. 1–9; see Gordon, 1995, p. 129). The American woman whom Levinsky's cloaks help to clothe is thus no passive mannequin but an active consumer, refashioning herself through purchase and display. Gabaccia's research underscores that this refashioning was rarely total: immigrant women practiced selective adaptation, adopting some garments while retaining others, so that dress became a layered record of compromise rather than a clean break (Gabaccia, 1994, pp. 110–112). The wardrobe of the immigrant woman told a story of negotiation, not conversion.

There is, however, a gendered asymmetry at the heart of Levinsky's enterprise that the novel never quite names but everywhere depends upon. As Wilson and other historians of dress observe, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw men's clothing converge toward uniformity—the dark suit, the restrained silhouette—while women's fashion remained dynamic, seasonal, and relentlessly change-driven (Wilson, 2003, pp. 180–193). Levinsky's fortune rests on this asymmetry. The American woman must continually renew her appearance, generating the perpetual demand on which his trade lives, while the American man, including Levinsky himself, may settle into a comparatively fixed sartorial identity. He profits, in short, from the ceaseless remaking of female appearance that *Yekl* had dramatized as a source of a woman's shame. The cloak he manufactures is the very type of structured, urban, market-oriented garment that displaced the shawl and the *sheitel*: a transitional form, less concealing than the shawl, more mobile than Old World dress, designed above all to be seen as one moves through public space. In clothing the American woman, Levinsky completes the transformation whose human cost the previous novel had measured on Gitl's body.

Wilson's account of dress as the outermost edge of the self (Wilson, 2003, p. 15) takes on a particular resonance in this commercial context. The cloak Levinsky sells is, for the woman who buys it, exactly such an edge: the surface at which she presents a modern American self to the public world, and behind which an older, ethnic, perhaps still-observant self may persist. The garment mediates between the two without resolving their tension—which is precisely why, in Wilson's analysis, fashion is so central to modern identity and so freighted with anxiety. The modern woman both constructs and is constructed by the gaze that reads her clothes; she is at once the author of her appearance and its hostage. Levinsky, supplying the raw material of that appearance, profits from an anxiety he does not share, for the asymmetry of modern dress allows him to settle into the fixed uniform of the prosperous American man while the women who wear his cloaks must perpetually renew themselves. The novel's sexual politics and its economics are, in this sense, the same politics: the remaking of the female surface is the engine of the male fortune.

This gap between production and belonging is where Levinsky's story rhymes most exactly with Jake's. Both men achieve a kind of mastery—Jake over the choreography of the dance hall, Levinsky over the mechanics of the market—and both discover that mastery of the surface does not secure the self. Where Jake performs Americanness with his shaved face and his slang, Levinsky manufactures it by the bolt; but neither the performance nor the product can be converted into the belonging each man craves. The continuity is precise: in the previous novel the garment is the immigrant's disguise, in the latter it is his



commodity, and in both it promises a transformation it cannot finally deliver. Cahan's sustained insight, across the two decades that separate the books, is that the garment is at once the most powerful instrument of self-fashioning available to the immigrant and the clearest evidence of its limits.

### **Matilda, Dora, and Anna Tevkin: Models of the modern Jewish woman**

*Levinsky* narrates its protagonist's rise as a sequence of women, each of whom embodies a different possibility of American belonging, and each legible through the dress, bearing, and milieu that surround her. To read these women is to watch the modern Jewish woman come into being as a set of competing types—and to register, behind them all, the figure against which they are defined. That figure is Levinsky's mother.

The mother is the novel's sacrificial origin, the embodiment of the older model of Jewish womanhood that the shtetl produced and that America renders obsolete. Cahan, characteristically, fixes her through a detail of covering. "Like all orthodox daughters of Israel," the narrator recalls, she kept her hair "carefully covered by a kerchief, a nightcap, or—on Saturdays and holidays—by a wig," and "she was extremely rigorous about it": while she changed her kerchief for her nightcap "she would cause me to look away" (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 4). Her life is one of poverty, religious devotion, and maternal self-denial, ending in a death suffered while defending her son. She is, in the terms this essay has developed, the head-covered woman of *Yekl's* Old World—Gitl's *sheitel* raised to the dignity of tragedy. Every later woman in Levinsky's life is measured, consciously or not, against her: against the covered, sacrificial, communal femininity she represents, and which the modern American woman has exchanged for visibility, mobility, and display. The mother is the shawl of the novel's human economy—the garment, and the womanhood, that has been folded away in the trunk.

The pathos of the mother is that her self-effacement is precisely what the new world has no use for. Her covered head, her devotion, her readiness to sacrifice herself for her son's study and safety: these are the virtues of a femininity organized around piety and the community, not around the self and its display. Gabaccia's framing is apt here—the immigrant woman as the designated keeper of cultural continuity (Gabaccia, 1994, pp. xi–xii)—for the mother keeps that continuity to the point of dying for it, and her death severs Levinsky's last living tie to the covered, communal womanhood of Antomir. Everything that follows in his erotic life is an attempt to recover, in the modern register of fashion and display, a maternal warmth that the modern register is constitutively unable to supply. The women he pursues are visible, cultivated, and self-possessed in ways his mother never was; that is their allure and, the novel implies, their insufficiency. The garment of the modern woman can be seen, admired, and purchased, but it cannot hold the sacrificial love that the mother's wig had, however joylessly, signified. Levinsky's lifelong dissatisfaction is, at bottom, the discovery that the visible cannot substitute for the devotional—that the new womanhood he has helped to clothe cannot mother him.

Matilda, the first of the three, belongs to the Old World yet already points beyond it. The daughter of the wealthy household in Antomir where his mother once worked, she is associated not with religious symbolism but with literacy, refinement, and an emancipated, semi-secular sophistication the shtetl cannot supply. Cahan introduces her not by ornament but by self-possession: Levinsky finds "a young woman with curly brown hair and sparkling brown eyes set in a small oval face" who "looked no more than twenty" and who, "singularly interesting," was nonetheless "pretty... she certainly was not" (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 35). She is "small, but well made," her "movements... brisk, firm, elastic," and her very name "had a world of charm for my ear" (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 35). Her composure is itself a modern

performance of femininity, one that requires self-fashioning as much as external fashion—the same performative self-construction that Motley identifies as the structuring logic of *Yekl* (Motley, 2011, p. 5). As the figure Levinsky carries with him across the ocean, Matilda becomes the imaginative bridge between Old World longing and New World aspiration; the wound of her rejection of him is the private engine of the ambition that drives his American rise. She is the first woman to teach him that belonging is something performed, and withheld.

The encounter with Matilda also inaugurates the pattern by which, throughout the novel, Levinsky converts erotic humiliation into economic ambition. Worldlier and higher-born, Matilda treats the young Levinsky with a mixture of affection and condescension that wounds him precisely because it exposes the gap between his origins and the refined world she inhabits. That wound does not heal; it is redirected. The drive to dress well, to speak well, to rise—the drive that will eventually express itself in the cloak factory—takes its first energy from the desire to become a man whom Matilda could not condescend to. In this sense the women of *Levinsky* are never merely romantic objects; they are the rungs by which the narrator measures his ascent and the mirrors in which he reads his still-incomplete Americanization. Dress, refinement, and self-presentation are the currency of these encounters, and Levinsky's eventual mastery of that currency in the marketplace is, at the level of the psyche, a long answer to the first woman who found him wanting.

Dora, whom Levinsky encounters at the height of his commercial ascent, represents a second model: the upwardly mobile domestic woman straining toward respectability. The wife of his business associate, Dora inhabits a world of self-improvement, and Cahan locates her aspiration with quiet poignancy in her relationship to her daughter's schooling. Dora, who “had never been taught to read even Hebrew or Yiddish, much less a Gentile language,” becomes “jealous of the child” when “her little girl possessed a Gentile book and was learning to read it”; she pursues her own education vicariously, through Lucy, watching the girl “learn to associate written signs with spoken words as she had once watched her learn to speak” (Cahan, 1917/1993, pp. 128–129). Here Schreier's insight that dress and domestic self-presentation could anticipate social change—signaling an upward mobility not yet economically secured, and sometimes masking insecurity behind a respectable surface—clarifies the texture of Dora's aspiration (Schreier, 1994, pp. 50–58). Dora performs a respectability she has not fully attained, just as Levinsky performs an Americanness he has not fully internalized. Their mutual attraction is, in part, a recognition of this shared incompleteness; its failure confirms a lesson the novel teaches repeatedly, that performance alone cannot manufacture belonging. Dora also embodies Gabaccia's figure of the immigrant woman as custodian of cultural continuity (Gabaccia, 1994, pp. xi–xii): torn between the respectability she covets and the familial and moral claims she cannot abandon, she chooses, unlike Levinsky, not to purchase advancement at the price of self-betrayal.

Anna Tevkin marks the furthest horizon of the modern Jewish woman. The daughter of a Hebrew poet, moving in a world of socialist conviction and cultural confidence, she is first glimpsed not in a parlor but on a tennis court at a fashionable Catskills resort. Levinsky, sitting on the veranda, sees “two girls with rackets and balls” begin to play, and one “arrested my attention violently”: “tall and stately, with a fine pink complexion and an effective mass of chestnut hair,” her face attesting “intellectual dignity and a kindly disposition,” her every movement possessing “a peculiar rhythm that was irresistible” (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 218). She “looked refined from head to foot” (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 218). The image is the precise antithesis of the head-covered women of Antomir: where the wig concealed and signified submission, the tennis dress reveals and signifies freedom, movement, and visibility. Her authority derives from education and intellectual engagement rather than ornament, and Levinsky's desire for her

shades into reverence for the cultural world she effortlessly inhabits. Schreier notes that the adoption of leisure itself—the vacation, the resort, the public display of the body at play—was for Jewish immigrants a potent form of Americanization, one in which dress and recreation became bound up with romance and self-redefinition (Schreier, 1994, pp. 120–126; Gordon, 1995, p. 131). That this final attachment also fails—Anna neither knows nor returns Levinsky's feeling—marks the definitive limit of his project of self-fashioning. He can manufacture the garments of American womanhood; he cannot purchase his way into the cultivated American world that wears them.

The resort that frames Anna deserves attention, for Cahan stages the whole Rigi Kulm as a theater of dress. “Dinner at the Rigi Kulm on a Saturday evening,” the narrator observes, “was not merely a meal,” but “chiefly... a great social function and a gown contest” (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 226). As each “matron or girl made her appearance,” the seated women would “look her over with feverish interest, comparing her gown and diamonds with their own,” the diners filing in “arrayed for the exhibition... like a procession of model-girls at a style-display in a big department store” (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 226). Most of these women, Levinsky notes acidly, “had a feeling as though wearing a hundred-and-fifty-dollar dress was in itself culture and education” (Cahan, 1917/1993, p. 226). Against this frantic economy of display, Anna's tennis whites read as effortless distinction—cultural capital that the gown contest can only counterfeit. That she is the daughter of a Hebrew poet—rooted in a Jewish cultural confidence Levinsky's ghetto childhood never afforded him—only sharpens the point. She possesses, effortlessly and by inheritance, the cultural ground that Levinsky has spent a lifetime and a fortune failing to buy.

Read together, these three women trace the transformation of Jewish female identity in immigrant America, moving from the sacrificial maternal model of the shtetl toward new and plural forms of social mobility, cultural capital, and public visibility. There is no single template for the modern Jewish woman: she is fragmented across Matilda's refinement, Dora's domestic aspiration, and Anna's intellect. What unites the three is their distance from the enclosed, tradition-bound femininity of Levinsky's mother—their freedom to move through public space, to be educated, to be seen. Yet the novel insists that this visibility is double-edged. As the contributors to *Fashion and Modernism* observe, the turn of the century intensified a culture of display in which women's bodies became sites of both spectacle and discipline, so that to appear modern demanded a careful and unceasing calibration of dress, gesture, and speech (Wallenberg & Kollnitz, 2019, pp. 3–4). Wilson makes the same point in psychological terms: modern fashion offers the individual a stabilizing identity even as it subjects her to the perpetual labor of self-display (Wilson, 2003, p. 24). Inclusion, for these women, depends on a performance whose costs Yekl had already exposed on Gitl's body.

That this history takes the form of a sequence, a succession of women each superseding the last, is itself significant, for it mirrors the logic of fashion as the historians of modernity describe it. Fashion, in Wilson's account, is defined by change—by the perpetual supersession of one style by the next, the restless forward motion that makes it “essential to the world of modernity” (Wilson, 2003, p. 24). The contributors to *The Cambridge Global History of Fashion* similarly locate the very essence of fashion in its mutability, its built-in obsolescence, its binding of identity to the new (Breward et al., 2023, pp. 1–3). Levinsky's erotic life obeys this same logic. Each woman is, in effect, a season: pursued, found wanting, and replaced by the next aspiration. The man who manufactures the perpetually renewed appearance of the American woman lives out, in his desires, the same restless seriality that drives his trade. He cannot rest in any attachment for the same reason fashion cannot rest in any style—and the women, reduced in his imagination to successive embodiments of an ever-receding belonging, pay the price of his inability to arrive.

### The garment and the gaze: conclusion

Across the two decades that separate *Yekl* from *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan tells one story twice: the discarding of the Old World covering and the assumption of structured, market-driven American dress. What changes between the books is only the scale and the vantage. The novella concentrates the transformation in a single garment, recoding Gitl's "voluminous wig" from a sign of piety into a badge of greenhorn difference; the novel disperses it across an industry, from the head-covered mother folded away like a shawl in a trunk to the gown contest at the Rigi Kulm and Anna Tevkin's tennis whites. Levinsky is the hinge between the two visions—the immigrant who profits from the perpetual remaking of female appearance even as he, like Jake before him, fails to secure the belonging he so relentlessly pursues. The wig that shames a wife in the first book becomes, in the second, the absence against which an entire fashion economy defines itself; the same logic, scaled from a marriage to a market.

The deeper continuity is a gendered irony that both books share. The men stake their identities on the performance of Americanness and end estranged from every world—no longer at home in the tradition they have shed, never admitted to the America they have courted. The women fare differently, and more variously, because they treat the garment not as a disguise to be exchanged at will but as something to be layered, negotiated, and worn without forfeiting the self beneath. Gitl, shamed for her clothing, adapts without self-erasure; Dora refuses to purchase advancement at the cost of her familial self; even the unattainable Anna possesses a cultural belonging Levinsky can only envy. Schooled by what Gabaccia calls selective adaptation (Gabaccia, 1994, pp. 110–112), Cahan's women understand what his men do not: that one cannot become someone else simply by changing one's clothes.

What the two books finally share, then, is the recognition that the Jewish woman's clothing is never simply her own. It is read, judged, and reshaped under a gaze that is always also a man's—a husband's in *Yekl*, a manufacturer's and an admirer's in *Levinsky*. Wilson's formula, that "dress is the frontier between the self and the not-self" (Wilson, 2003, p. 15), acquires in Cahan a specifically gendered and ethnic charge: for the immigrant Jewish woman, that frontier was patrolled by others, and crossing it exacted a toll. The historical record assembled by Schreier confirms that this was no fictional contrivance; dress was a leading emblem of assimilation precisely because it was the most visible, the most quickly altered, and the most intensely scrutinized of the immigrant's attributes, and that scrutiny fell most heavily, and most consequentially, on women (Schreier, 1994, pp. 4–11).

To read *Yekl* and *The Rise of David Levinsky* through the lens of dress is therefore not to attend to a decorative detail but to recover one of Cahan's central and most prescient insights. Clothing in his fiction is constitutive, not ornamental: it does not merely accompany the drama of assimilation but stages it, and stages it on the body of the Jewish woman. Reading through the garment also restores to the center figures who have too often stood at the edge of Cahan criticism, which has tended to follow the novels' own male narrators in treating the women as foils or as rungs on the ladder of male ascent. Gitl, the mother, Matilda, Dora, and Anna are not merely objects of male desire and male shame; they are the figures through whom Cahan thinks most precisely about what it costs, and what it means, to become American. Behind them stand the historical women whom Schreier and Gabaccia recover—the seamstresses and shopgirls who pooled their wages for a plumed hat, the wives who exchanged the *sheitel* for a hat, the daughters who clashed with their mothers over a hemline. To read Cahan's novels through the garment is to hold the fiction and the history in a single view, and to see that the question of the American Jewish woman was, from the first, a question stitched into cloth.

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