Avraham Novershtern

**A Time for Love, the Language of Love**

**Sholem Aleykhem's *Stempenyu***

1888 was the annus mirabilis for Sholem Aleykhem’s career, and for nineteenth century Yiddish literature in general. He was extremely productive in that year, writing in a variety of genres: short stories, feuilletons, literary reviews, and even poetry.[[1]](#endnote-1) Amongst this remarkable output, Sholem Aleykhem considered one work the highlight of his contribution to Yiddish literature: his novel *Stempenyu*. The young writer was fascinated by the myriad possibilities of a novel set in a typical Jewish *shtetl*, focused on a love affair that blossoms at lightning speed between two married persons: Rokhele, the daughter of a respectable family who had wed only recently, and Stempenyu, a *klezmer* who radiates unbridled erotic charm. Their love flares up at once, and immediately leads to very different outcomes for its two partners: Rokhele breaks off the brief affair before anyone can know anything about it; she regrets it deeply and returns body and soul to her husband’s embrace. Stempenyu, by contrast, held captive to an unhappy marriage, cannot forget his beloved.

This plot presented a special challenge to Sholem Aleykhem: How does one write about love in Yiddish? Did the contemporary Yiddish literary language have the appropriate means at its disposal to describe the act of love? And if not, how can one fashion these tools? Furthermore, what is the proper place of love in the world of the *shtetl* Jew? It was indeed a complex challenge, and for that very reason Sholem Aleykhem had high hopes for this novel, to which he devoted several months of intensive work in the second half of 1888. He viewed *Stempenyu* as a turning point in his career, and he wanted the book to be a watershed in the development of Yiddish literature as well. He mentioned the novel in many letters to contemporaries, and sought to convey its uniqueness both in the introduction to the book and in an article he wrote immediately after its initial publication.[[2]](#endnote-2) There is no other text in the extensive oeuvre of Sholem Aleykhem whose emergence was accompanied by such a plethora of comments on the part of the author himself.

This is one of the main reasons why *Stempenyu*’s place in the historical consciousness of Yiddish culture goes far beyond its actual artistic value. The novel was eventually the impetus for a comprehensive article in 1928 by Nokhem Oyslender, a talented Soviet critic, a piece that should be considered a focal point for research on modern Yiddish literature.[[3]](#endnote-3) Twenty years later a critical edition of *Stempenyu* appeared, part of an overarching project launched in Moscow to publish all the works of Sholem Aleykhem, a plan that was cut short due to the fierce campaign waged in the Soviet Union against Yiddish culture.[[4]](#endnote-4) This laid the proper foundation for an analysis of this novel, a text that remains one of the focuses of Yiddish literary research.[[5]](#endnote-5)

II.

In Sholem Aleykhem’s eyes there was no better way to mark the special status of his novel than by opening it with a detailed introduction, dedicated to Mendele Moykher Sforim, who is granted the honorary title of the “zeyde” (“grandfather”) of Yiddish literature. This is a revealing, well-articulated literary document, but careful readers would probably have found it somewhat puzzling: The novel is called *Stempenyu*, but Stempenyu is not the first character discussed. Beforehand, Sholem Aleykhem offers a lengthy analysis of what he believes should be the unique nature of the “Jewish novel,” and here he refers to a different character: “Un dos hob ikh gevolt aroyszogn durkh der *yidisher tokhter*, Rokhele di sheyne, vos shpilt di greste role inem dozikn roman” (“and I tried to express it through the *Jewish daughter*, *Rokhele* the lovely, who plays the largest role in this novel”). [[6]](#endnote-6) Only in the subsequent paragraph is the eponymous hero of the novel mentioned for the first time, and the introduction later presents a third character, Stempenyu’s wife. It is worth noting that the phrasing differs slightly with regard to each of the characters that will play central roles in the novel:

Dem yidishn kinstler *Stempenyu* mit zayn fidele*, di yidishe tokhter Rokhele* di sheyne mit ir yidish erlekhkeyt un dos yidishe vaybl *Freydl* mit ir sokhrishn gayst un mit ir tsitern ibern kerbl - yeder mit zayn bazunder veltl.

[The Jewish artist Stempenyu with his fiddle, the *Jewish daughter* *Rokhele* the lovely with her Jewish virtue and the Jewish wife *Freydl* with her commercial spirit, trembling over her purse – each one with his own small world.]

From the outset there is an apparent division here between two “positive” figures and a third individual with thoroughly negative characteristics. Furthermore, whereas Stempenyu is depicted mainly through his profession and the musical instrument he plays, the portrayal of Rokhele is more detailed: It includes the twin components of external beauty and character, but even before that, the typological cultural label that was already stated earlier is repeated *–* she istruly *a yidishe* *tokhter*.

As stated earlier, Rokhele came from an established *shtetl* family, and her life was normative in all aspects. Stempenyu, by contrast, is a *klezmer*, and as such was a marginal figure in Jewish society. At the start of the novel, Stempenyu is enjoying a bohemian lifestyle in the full sense of the term: Brief erotic encounters, careless handling of expenses, and a life of partying together with the members of his band, during which they would talk among themselves in the peculiar Yiddish slang of *klezmer*s. The literary status of these two heroes, then, could not be more different: Rokhele is a typical *yidishe tokhter*, whereas Stempenyu is an unusual hero, whose most notable feature is his artistic talent. Adorned with a romantic halo, he is an enigma for many of the *shtetl* residents.

Which of these should be the main protagonist of the work: The man or the woman, the stock character or the unusual hero? Both the introduction to the novel and the later essay imply that Sholem Aleykhem sought to have the best of both worlds: On the one hand he felt that the society of the *klezmer* and their jargon offered a unique literary opportunity to depict a possibly unparalleled social group in the Jewish world. Rokhele, on the other hand, would inevitably remind the reader of characters who already had received significant attention in contemporary Hebrew and Yiddish literature, mainly because its writers frequently sought to bring attention to the particular status and fate of women in traditional Jewish society.

The shaping of Rokhele’s character throughout the novel indeed followed an expected pattern. Her background is highly conventional: It includes a standard upbringing; a life path that leads her straight to the obvious matrimonial match; the traditional books which are central to her spiritual world; and her loyalty to her family and her husband. Yet Rokhele is blessed with a special sensitivity that distinguishes her from the emotional dullness of her close surroundings and her husband, even though her options for expressing this quality are rather limited.

 In traditional Jewish society, both men and women had to struggle to express their inner world to its full extent, but even so the communicative possibilities open to a man were infinitely more variegated than those available to a woman. Stempenyu’s language is music, the nonverbal expression. As a *klezmer*, he is also a public figure in the *shtetl*, as he plays at weddings and other celebrations. On those occasions he can express his rich inner world without resorting to words. In this respect the very limitations of the *klezmer* are also his source of strength. The kind of personal expression that was unavailable to an average Jew in a *shtetl* was open to Stempenyu:

Er flegt a khap tun dos fidele un a fir tun mitn smik, eyn fir tun, nisht mer, flegt dos shoyn onheybn bay im tsu redn; Ober vi azoy meynt ir redn? Take mit verter, mit a tsung, vi, lehavdl, a lebediker mentsh; Redn, taynen, zingen mit a geveyn, afn yidishn shteyger, mit a gvaldernish, mit an oysgeshrey funem tifn hartsn, fun der neshome (p. 129).

[He would grab the violin and apply the bow, just one stroke, nothing more, and the violin had already begun to speak. And how do you think it spoke? Why, with words, with a tongue, like a human being – if you’ll forgive my mentioning them in the same breath. It spoke, pleaded, crooned tearfully, in a Jewish mode, with a force, a scream from the depths of the heart, the soul (p. 288).]

Stempenyu’s music speaks “afn yidishn shteyger,” “in a Jewish mode,” for which the violin is the appropriate medium. It is an emotionally charged “speech,” a mixture of song and tears that swells into a primary cry bursting out from the heart. Music is depicted as the language of the romantic hero, and there is no doubting its pristine sincerity and its strength. Later the novel describes the almost religious status of ecstasy that takes hold of Stempenyu when he plays, which reaches the level of self-effacement. It should be noted that although his rich language was a remarkable feature of Sholem Aleykhem’s style, throughout his “first Jewish novel” he appeals to the covert language of music in order to shape a scene of lofty ecstasy.

Already in the first chapter, which describes Stempenyu’s “pedigree,” his art is presented in a threefold context: The “zingen” of the cantor; the “zogn” of the *badkhn* (jester); and the *klezmer*’s “shpiln” (p 288 / 128). With these categories in mind, the special status of music stands out in the detailed description of the wedding ceremony in the *shtetl*, an event that plays a crucial role in the plot of the novel because it basically serves as its starting point: It is at this wedding that Rokhele makes her first acquaintance with Stempenyu. A Jewish wedding of this kind would invariably feature a *badkhn* with his rhymes that blend sadness with humor, but in this case such a figure is barely mentioned. Stempenyu’s captivating music takes over everything, and the purity of his melody contrasts starkly with the earlier bland cries and talk of the crowd. Time and again Sholem Aleykhem repeats the word *“*shrayen*,”* (to screech, pp. 153/306), in reference to the cacophony of the bustle at the wedding and the “veiling lunch” that followed, during which no one can hear his companion. The remarkable silence that accompanies Stempenyu’s playing couldn’t be more different.

As stated above, the avenues available for expressing the inner world of such an outstanding character as a *klezmer*, a man, were barred to women. Although Sholem Aleykhem does not refer explicitly to the famous rabbinical statement that “a woman’s voice is licentious,” it is obvious that the pubic singing of women was not an accepted feature of *shtetl* society. Furthermore, the possibility of a woman knowing how to play any sort of musical instrument and earning money from it, in the manner of a *klezmer*, was almost inconceivable in those days. Thus Sholem Aleykhem could bring the woman’s inner world to the fore only indirectly, and he did so mainly through Yiddish folksongs. Rokhele chants such ditties both for herself and to her female friends, and in one exceptionally emotional episode, after she regrets the affair with Stempenyu, she sings to her husband a song designed to express the turbulence of her emotional state at that unique juncture.

A comparison between these sections, the one referring to Stempenyu’s playing and the other to Rokhele’s folksongs, is indicative of Sholem Aleykhem sensitivity and awareness of the essential difference between the ways in which men and women could express themselves. After all, Rokhele does not perform songs that she composed, but sings folksongs that she can share with her audience. The man’s language, instrumental music, is far more varied than the verbal possibilities open to the woman, and Stempenyu achieves a kind of ecstatic state that is completely out of reach for Rokhele. Their audience’s reaction also differs in both cases: The girls who listen to Rokehele respond with worry, sighs and tears, whereas the mixed crowd that hears Stempenyu’s music experience a far more nuanced emotional reaction.

Stempenyu’s presence throughout the novel is doubly marked, both by his erotic attraction, with its magical, even slightly demonic element, as well as his playing, which uplifts his audience to a state of elation that has religious undertones. He embodies the magic of lofty art together with the dangerous and somewhat dark charm of the erotic. The love affair between him and Rokhele unfolds under the sign of this duality, starting with their initial acquaintance at the wedding celebrations and their instantaneous mutual fascination. It continues with courtship efforts on the part of Stempenyu, including a love letter written in a naive style and rough language. It is indeed unlikely that a *klezmer* in a *shtetl* would know how to express his feelings with appropriate refinement, especially not in correct Yiddish. Stempenyu’s language of love is quite limited in its rhetoric; it is unpolished and even childish. His erotic charm radiating from his musical performances does not translate into the verbal realm.

Nevertheless, the clumsy written note which Stempenyu sends to Rokhele has immediate consequences. It leads to a snatched meeting between the two in the alley of the monastery, a spot whose symbolism is perhaps too transparent and obvious: It serves to underline the existence of the foreign and threatening non-Jewish world in midst of *shtetl* life. This one and only erotic encounter between the lovers includes a highly charged verbal exchange that ends with a quick kiss. Yet for Rokhele that was more than enough: Her aversion to the very possibility of starting a love affair out of wedlock is both an instinctive reaction of disgust and fear on her part and also an expression of the values of a married woman, for whom the rules of normative religious life are supposed to serve as a guiding light.

The extreme compression of the lovers’ encounter is designed to convey Rokhele’s innermost character as a *yidishe tokhter*: She was tempted by the forbidden love for a mere moment, but promptly restores her loyalty to her husband, without him or anyone near them sensing the depths of her turmoil. Undoubtedly, the shriveled actualization of the erotic attraction between Stempenyu and Rokhele should be understood in the literary context in which the novel was composed: *Stempenyu* was written, among other reasons, to serve as a counterweight to the sensationalistic novels of Shomer and the whole cluster of writers who followed him and flooded the small book market of Yiddish novels. Indeed, after the description of the short erotic meeting, the narrator explicitly states that his restraint is a reaction to the expansiveness of contemporary Yiddish trashy novels. Two married people in a *shtetl* might perhaps be tempted for a moment into a forbidden love, but such a relationship is doomed from the outset, and cannot serve as the backbone of a Yiddish realistic novel.

Sholem Aleykhem’s explicit stance on this matter, articulated both in the introduction and in various comments sprinkled throughout the text, also leaves its clear imprint in the shaping of the dimension of time in the novel. A mere few weeks, perhaps even less, elapsed between the first meeting between Stempenyu and Rokhele in the midst of a large crowd in the *shtetl* wedding until their secret engagement in the monastery alley, which is also their last real encounter.

The twin stories of Stempenyu and Rokhele vividly illustrate the “dangers” lying in wait for those who fall in love, how much more so for those who let their erotic impulses run loose. As befitting her family background, Rokhele was wed by an arranged marriage, after which she left her place of residence to live in the home of her husband’s parents. She accepts her fate and her place in society, which the novel considers an appropriate outcome for a woman of her sort. This is indicative of Sholem Aleykhem’s basic conservatism, both in artistic and in broader ideological terms.

 Yet at the same time he realizes that it is fit and even pertinent to bring about, at the end of the story, a significant change to the living conditions of the young couple. After the brief affair Rokhele actually takes the initiative in this respect: She urges her husband to free himself from his dependence on his parents and leave the *shtetl* in order for them to start a new life as an independent couple in another place, a bigger city. A letter the couple send to his parents, who read it aloud at home, shows that this move was a complete success, and the transformation undergone by Rokhele and her family is depicted as an ideal matrix for the continuity of Jewish life beyond the *shtetl* frontier. Hers is thus an opposite fate to Stempenyu’s tragic end, as he refuses to accept his loss and the unrequited love. The very different paths of the novel’s two protagonists provide an implicit ethical statement: Forbidden love is a destructive force, and only those who resist its temptation can prosper in life. Stempenyu remains a prisoner of his past, whereas Rokhele faces the future. She was not meant to be a Jewish version of Madame Bovary.

III.

The literary and cultural implications of the plot of *Stempenyu* are significant for an evaluation of the novel in its contemporary context. In that same year, 1888, three major works of Yiddish literature were published, all of which center on a love affair and its ensuing complex ramifications. The first volume of *Di yudishe folks-biblyothek* offered the full text of *Stempenyu* as its supplement, and it also included Peretz’s debut work in Yiddish, the narrative poem “Monish.” The chief protagonist of this poem, a youth who was part and parcel of the normative Jewish *shtetl* in the pre-Modern period, falls victim to demonic erotic temptation. In addition, this is the year in which Mendele published the second and greatly extended version of *Fishke der* *krumer* (“Fishke the Lame”), a story about love, jealousy and violence, revealed in all their intensity amongst a bunch of wandering Jewish beggars. Peretz’s Monish falls into perdition after he is ensnared in the web of temptations spread out before him; Fishke effectively abandons the woman he had legally married, however reluctantly, in favor of a new and pure love. In comparison to these figures, Rokhele faces erotic temptation, but withstands the test.

Just as Rokhele was able to express her feelings only indirectly, through folk songs, while the vibrant inner world of Stempenyu shone from the music he played, so too music and song fulfil a key role when Monish wishes to express his awakening emotions. He too cannot express his love in words, and relies on an essentially pre-linguistic form of expression. Yet in this respect, Peretz the poet was far bolder than Sholem Aleykhem the novelist: The underlying conflict in *Stempenyu* is shaped in “Monish” as an open confrontation between two voices – the seductive girl’s voice and the voice of the tempted man. In both cases songs without words come to the fore.

Furthermore, Peretz’s poem fashions an extensive matrix of associations around the various meanings of the verb *zingen* (to sing). One of its key expressions is a lengthy digression in which the poet lays out the difficulties in articulating a love plot in Yiddish. It is often quoted in Yiddish literary criticism and research as proof of the challenges that faced Modern Yiddish poetry in its early period. Over the years Peretz introduced some minor changes in this text, and the following is taken from the first printed version of 1888:

Mayn lid volt andersh gor geklungen,

Ikh zol far goyim goyish zingen,

Nor nisht far yidn, nisht zhargon.

Keyn rekhtn klang, keyn rekhtn ton,

Keyn eyntsik vort nit un keyn stil

Hob ikh far “libe”, far “gefil”!

[My poem would have sounded completely different / if I were to sing for non-Jews in a non-Jewish language, / not for Jews, not in jargon. / No proper sound, no proper tone! / Not one single word and no style / Have I for ‘love’, for ‘feeling’].

For Peretz, the absence of Yiddish words for expressing “love” and “emotion” is the most suitable illustration of the ultimate limitations of the language when it tries to achieve the level of serious literature.[[7]](#endnote-7) Both Peretz and Sholem Aleykhem grappled with the same issue, but whereas the modern poet articulated the problem overtly, in a poignant manner, the novelist referred to it implicitly. Yet the basic similarity in their approaches is striking: When Peretz refers negatively to the inadequate resources of Yiddish, he uses terms that are taken from the world of music, such as sound and tone.

These two very different works, the novel of Sholem Aleykhem and Peretz’s poem, were published concurrently in the same literary anthology. They reflect the way in which Yiddish writers deployed similar means when they tried to fashion the language of love in Yiddish: Words, sounds, language and music. In both cases, gender plays a central role: Peretz explicitly cites the aforementioned saying regarding “a woman’s voice,” and he uses the term *zingen* again and again, in diverse contexts. Sholem Aleykhem addresses this issue indirectly but in an equally significant manner, as he combines in his novel excerpts of Yiddish folksongs chanted by a woman.

The three literary works, whose plots are woven around very different love affairs and which were published at the same time – *Fishke der* *krumer*, *Stempenyu*, and “Monish” – all eventually achieved a degree of canonization in the Yiddish literary tradition. Yet their recognized status should not allow us forget the fact that in those years many novels were published that focused on romantic affairs. I of course have in mind the books of Shomer and the writers who emulated him, romances which were the daily fare of the average Yiddish reader.

This literary corpus is indeed extremely diverse, as it includes the writings of Sholem Aleykhem, Mordkhe Spektor (his contemporary and friend), as well as Mendele, Peretz, and perhaps also Shomer and his imitators. It begs for a comparative analysis. In his aforementioned groundbreaking 1928 article on *Stempenyu*, Nokhem Oyslender opened the way for an understanding of Sholem Aleykhem’s novel in its wider cultural context. This short article will be published in 2018, ninety years after Oyslender’s work, but the challenge he set before us has yet to be met.

Translated from the Hebrew by Avi Steinhart

ENDNOTES:

1. For a short, but comprehensive breakdown of the life and works of Sholem Aleykhem in each and every year, see the chronological list at the end of: Y.D. Berkowitz )ed.) , Dos Sholem Aleykhem bukh (N.Y: 1926; reprint: 1958), 362. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “A briv tsu a gutn fraynd”, Di yudishe folks-biblyothek 2 (Kiev, 1890), pp.304-309. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Nokhem Oyslender, “Der yunger Sholem Aleykhem un zayn roman ‘Stempenyu,’”, Shriftn 1 (Kiev, 1928), pp. 5-72. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sholem Aleykhem, Ale verk, 3: Stempenyu; Yosele solovey (Moscow: Der emes, 1948). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Dorothy Bilik, “Love in Sholem Aleykhem’s Early Novels,” (=Working Papers in Yiddish and East European Jewish Studies, 10) (New York: YIVO, 1975); Anita Norich, “Portraits of the Artist in Three Novels by Sholem Aleichem,” Prooftexts 4 (1984): 237-251. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The Yiddish text follows the second version of the novel, edited by the author himself (Warsaw, 1903). However, the page numbers refer to the most available edition of his works, the “Folksfond-oysgabe,” published in New York, 1917-1923 and reprinted many times since. The English translation is by Joachim Neugroschel, The Shtetl: A Creative Anthology of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe (New York: Richard Marek, 1979). This version doesn’t include the introduction to the novel. My thanks to Anita Norich, who provided me with an English translation of the introduction. The emphases are in the original. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For an analysis of Peretz’s poem in the context of the changing images of the language shaped by Yiddish poets, see my article: “’Thou Shalt Make Thee an Image:’ Yiddish Writers Representing Their Language,” in: Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives, ed. Joshua L. Miller and Anita Norich (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 74-79.

**Biographical Note:**

Avraham Novershtern is the Joseph and Ida Berman Professor in Yiddish at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the director of Beth Sholem Aleykhem in Tel Aviv. His books include The Lure of Twilight: Apocalypse and Messianism in Yiddish Literature (Hebrew, 2003), and Here Dwells the Jewish People: American Yiddish Literature (Hebrew, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)