Indian Journal of Modern Research and Reviews

This Journal is a member of the *'Committee on Publication Ethics'*

Online ISSN:2584-184X

Review Article

Between Clay and Fire: Reimagining Jewish and Arab Folklore in *the Golem and The Jinni*

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18351325

Abstract

The Golem and the Jinni by Helene Wecker interprets Jewish and Arab mythical characters in the context of nineteenth-century New York's immigrant population. The paper uses the framework of Myth and Folklore Studies to analyse the book from a modern perspective, emphasizing how old myths are reworked in current, diasporic contexts. The story depicts myth as a dynamic type of cultural memory that adjusts to migration, dislocation, and cultural contact rather than portraying folklore as static or antiquated. Both the jinni Ahmad and the golem Chava represent inherited legendary traditions, but when they face new societal realities, their identities change. The paper contends that Wecker use folklore to examine questions of identity, belonging, and hybridity in immigrant communities, drawing on theorists like Jack Zipes, Marina Warner, Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, and Amira El-Zein. The book illustrates how myths span cultural boundaries and change as they come into contact with modernity. Wecker blurs the line between myth and reality by situating otherworldly figures in a realistic historical setting, demonstrating how folklore still influences modern storytelling. The paper argues that *The Golem and the Jinni* acts as a transcultural fantasy that protects cultural memory while facilitating communication between Arab and Jewish traditions, making a substantial contribution to the study of modern mythology and global literature.

Manuscript Information

- **ISSN No:** 2583-7397
- **Received:** 11-12-2025
- **Accepted:** 19-01-2026
- **Published:** 23-01-2026
- **IJCRM:**4(1); 2026: 182-184

- **Plagiarism Checked:** Yes
- **Peer Review Process:** Yes

How to Cite this Article

H. Ayahathul Siddikha, M. Benazir Nuzrath. Between Clay and Fire: Reimagining Jewish and Arab Folklore in *the Golem and The Jinni*. Indian J Mod Res Rev. 2026;4(1):182-184.

Access this Article Online

www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: Jewish and Arab traditions, Myth, Folklore, Diaspora, Cultural Memory, and Transcultural Fantasy.

INTRODUCTION

Folklore and myth have long been connected to oral traditions and ancient communities. Nonetheless, myth is acknowledged in modern literary studies as a dynamic narrative form that adapts to historical and social shifts. Folklore "is continually reshaped by the historical and social conditions in which it is told," according to Jack Zipes (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 2). This concept is essential to comprehend contemporary fantasy literature that situates mythological characters in authentic environments. Helene Wecker does more than just recount Arab and Jewish stories in *The Golem and the Jinni*. Rather, she rewrites them to represent the experience of being an immigrant. The book demonstrates how folklore endures by changing with its surroundings rather than staying the same. Myth is particularly pertinent to diaspora tales because of its adaptability. Two rich mythical traditions are the source of the golem and the jinni. Drawing from Jewish Kabbalistic mythology, the golem is a clay creature that is given life by sacred words. The golem has always stood for both the perils of human hubris and heavenly inventiveness. The golem in Wecker's book, Chava, is made to serve but eventually gains moral insight and emotional awareness.

In Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni*, mythological characters face the immigrant turmoil of 1899 New York, demonstrating this flexibility. On a ship, Chava the golem was awakened by her master Rotfled, Wecker proclaims:

First to wake were her senses. She felt the roughness of wood under her fingertips, the cold, damp air on her skin. She sensed the movement of the boat. She smelled mildew, and the tang of seawater. She woke a little more, and knew she had a body. The fingertips that felt the wood were her own. The skin that the air chilled was her skin. She moved a finger, to see if she could. (*The Golem and the Jinni* 12)

This sudden plunge into human instability demonstrates how folklore has adapted to the confusion of modernity. Wecker views myths as survival strategies rather than artefacts. After being released from a flask, Ahmad the Jinni rants about being imprisoned. The author states:

He looked down at the iron railing, then gripped it with both hands, concentrating. He was near exhaustion; the confinement in the flask had apparently destroyed his strength—but even so, within a few moments the metal was glowing a dull red. He tightened his grip and then let go, leaving behind an outline of his fingers pressed into the railing. No, he wasn't helpless. He was still a jinni, one of the most powerful of his kind. And there were always ways. (TGTJ 32)

Their parallel isolations—"Two such different creatures, yet both were lonely and all but friendless in the world (Wecker 57)" draw attention to the role that myth plays in expressing diaspora alienation. Wecker's approach is framed by Zipes' thesis, which holds that pressures from the Progressive Era, such as labour disputes and tenement overpopulation, changed true legend.

Islamic and Arab legend are the origins of the jinni Ahmad. Jinn are moral creatures with free choice, in contrast to demons in Western mythology. Jinn "occupy a middle realm between humans and angels, capable of choice and ethical action," according to Amira El-Zein (El-Zein 21). This dichotomy is reflected in Ahmad's persona, who is both strong and self-assured and weak because of his forced incarceration in human form. Wecker establishes a comparative mythological space that permits interaction between Arab and Jewish traditions without hierarchy or conflict by grouping these figures together. The use of myth as cultural memory for immigrant groups is one of the novel's main themes. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is "a matter of becoming as well as of being (Hall 225)". This viewpoint clarifies how Chava and Ahmad manage their identities in the United States.

Wecker makes picked discoveries without annotation, Chava rushes with unexpected strength and declares "She could feel the power rising in her, the clay of her body thrumming with it (TGTJ 112)". This change in agency is a reflection of diaspora flux, as self-determination replaces conventional slavery. Wecker adds, "He was a creature of fire, born in lamps and wishes... Now he was trapped in tin (TGTJ 89)". Tension is created by their elemental opposition—fire's volatility vs earth's steadfastness—as Ahmad encourages recklessness while Chava calls for moderation, creating comparative mythology without cultural superiority.

Both characters' sense of self is shaped by recollections of where they came from. Ahmad's yearning for the desert and Chava's grasp of Jewish ethical precepts demonstrate how mythological memory preserve's identity even in exile. Since the protagonists are always torn between the past and the present, Svetlana Boym's idea of nostalgia as a need for cultural continuity is pertinent here (*The Future of Nostalgia 41*). As a result, myth becomes a survival mechanism that helps displaced people stay connected to their roots.

Chava struggles after learning from Rabbi Meyer: "What am I, if not what he made me? (TGTJ 203)". Jewish continuity is maintained by her natural ethics, which recognize human worries in shtetls. Ahmad conjures up the expanse of Little Syria and observes, "The open sky... that was home (TGTJ145)". Ahmad secretly fixes bulbs in Little Syria, while Chava helps Jewish refugees. These actions prevent the cultural deterioration caused by assimilation: jinni fire repairs metal, golem strength lifts containers.

The novel's interplay between myth and modernity can be better understood by applying Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the "third space." According to Bhabha, areas of interaction and negotiation are where cultural meaning develops (*The Location of Culture 37*). In Wecker's story, New York serves as such a location. Myths are able to spread beyond their initial cultural limits because the city unites Arab and Jewish immigrants. The connection between Chava and Ahmad represents this cross-cultural interaction. Understanding across cultural differences is made possible by their shared feeling of displacement, indicating that myth may serve as a bridge rather than a barrier.

The neighbourhoods of Manhattan facilitate the relationship between Chava and Ahmad. They had their first meeting after the death of Rabbi, Chava was in a state where she felt as if she lost everything and exhausted. Ahmad noticed her uniqueness in the very first glance and understood that she is different from

human beings. Likewise, she too guessed the same about the uniqueness of his origin. Wecker adds:

Immediately he stopped. The air around her held a breath of mist, and the scent of something dark and rich. “What are you?” he asked. She said nothing, gave no indication she’d understood. He tried again: “You’re not human. You’re made of earth.” At last she spoke. “And you’re made of fire,” she said. The shock of it hit him square in the chest, and on its heels an intense fear. He took a step backward. “How,” he said, “did you know that?” “Your face glows. As if lit from within. Can no one else see it?” Yet, they understood each other… (TGTJ 166)

Rooftop conversations combine enthusiasm and moderated discourse. Chava advises that he must learn to wait. The Rabbi notes the contrast between golem inquiry and Jinni contempt for faith. Hybridity is forced by their coalition against Iron Man, which binds golem and jinni mythology. In a review, Roger Reads says, "Their existence threatened, bringing them back together". This transcultural myth transforms solitude into mutual progress, bridging gaps.

Additionally, Wecker's book falls within frameworks for world literature. According to Pascale Casanova, literary works that transcend national limits have worldwide relevance (*The World Republic of Letters 4*). A worldwide readership may access *The Golem and the Jinni* because it speaks to universal issues and borrows from a variety of cultures. According to Marina Warner, myths endure because they are recounted in novel ways and settings (*From the Beast to the Blonde xvii*). This approach is shown by Wecker's fusion of historical realism with folklore. The book demonstrates how myth is intricately entwined with modernity rather than being in opposition to it.

Wecker incorporates folklore into the harsh realities of modernity, such as streetcars, occult groups, and cholera scares. "The city was a living thing, pulsing with a thousand different lives (TGTJ 78)” is how Chava describes the bustle of the market. Ahmad adopts tinwork while mocking human rites. The novel's universal appeal—Jewish-Arab stories in American babel—elevates comparative folklore and demonstrates how myth is ingrained in advancement.

The Golem and the Jinni illustrates the continued importance of myth and folklore in modern writing. Helene Wecker portrays folklore as a living cultural memory that adjusts to exile and cross-cultural interaction by reworking Jewish and Arab legendary characters within an immigrant American context. The experiences of Chava and Ahmad demonstrate how myth influences moral comprehension, identity, and a sense of belonging in diaspora populations. The book encourages discussion across traditions while maintaining their uniqueness through a comparative and transcultural perspective. *The Golem and the Jinni* is a significant text for contemporary myth, folklore, and global literature studies because Wecker's work ultimately demonstrates how myth is still evolving.

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