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### Telling the Jewish American Story: Exile, Guilt and Identity in Contemporary Jewish American Friction

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#### ABSTRACT

By analysing the writings of Saul Bellow, Tony Kushner and Keith Gandal, this survey paper traces the impact of the historical Jewish journey to the Promised Land in providing the underlying metaphor for the Jewish condition in particular and the human condition in general. Beginning with exploring the Jewish American identity, it focuses on the notions of uprootedness that lie at the heart of the Jewish self. The argument here foregrounds how the concept of Jewish exclusivity is firmly entrenched in the Jewish identity as it emanates from the Talmud and manifests itself in their creative writings. Basing its exploration on the premise that storytelling is deemed to be a Jewish inheritance, this essay works on the ideas of the Holocaust, the complete history of Jewish deracination across many regions, and the conceptions of sin and guilt that manifest themselves in Jewish-American writings. In so doing, it unravels the schisms and dilemmas that have surfaced owing to the efforts of the Jewish American writers in portraying the problems of acculturation and assimilation in the USA while striving to deal with their Jewish identity.

#### The Jewish – American Identity

For most Jewish American writers, the Jewish identity has remained problematic. Even though Philip Roth declared: “I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew” (qtd. Im Wirth-Nesher 2003, p. 23) and Saul Bellow talked about writing about the universal human condition, yet both these

writers are labeled as Jewish Americans. This is because born in Jewish families and having moved to America at some stage in their lives, their texts and the experiences that those texts contain, rise up to embrace the human experience in general. Yet, these texts are mired in a very lucid awareness of both the Jewish and American heritage that has been passed on to them. This dual heritage reveals paradoxes and schisms within the experiences that these writers portray since the deracinated Jew seems to be exposing the cracks and faults in the new territory of the United States of America where he is trying to establish his roots. However, since the Jews have traditionally inherited a sense of de-territorialization, this sense also grants them a certain degree of freedom in expression as they experiment with the various literary and cultural stimuli available to them. Hence, the compositions of writers like Bellow, Tony Kushner and Kieth Gandal begin with Jewish-specific situations but try to embrace the collective human experience. It is these aspects influencing contemporary Jewish American fiction that this paper unpacks.

Before the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jews had led a diasporic existence in various continents and cultures. Their presence was manifest in Germany, Poland, Eastern European states and Russia in particular. Yet political and religious oppression in various forms compelled them to migrate to a place where they could live freely. Hitler's racial extermination of the Jews led to America's opening up its doors to the Jewish refugees who approached America as the land of promise and hope. However, integration into the American society was not easy. Set apart by centuries of suppression and a history extending over two millennia, the Jewish Americans remained a race apart. Although becoming power-brokers in the American way of life, their inherent sense of being different is manifest in the many artistic and literary productions that they have produced. According to Norman Finkelstein a person's Jewish identity:

Is to be understood from a socio-historical perspective: to be a Jew means to have a certain origin, a certain relation to society, a certain set of cultural goals. For the following generation, all of these conditions obtain, but in addition Judaism provides a relatively detailed intellectual infrastructure, and a creative, formative idea as well as a unique social milieu. (1992, p. 146).

It is this social milieu that Gandal, Kushner and Bellow set out to explore as their writings delve into the complexities of what it means to be a Jew in America.

### **The Jewish Journey**

For the Jews, the word 'journey' seems to be historically synonymous with their way of life, their culture and even their identity. In a state of exile since the time of Moses, the 'chosen seed' seem to have remained perpetual wanderers, searching for the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey, as the

*Torah* promises. Yet exile seems to have been the natural state of these people, as they migrated “out of the house of bondage” (Deuteronomy 5:6) i.e. Egypt, across borders only to land into oppression and slavery repeatedly throughout history. Even as the religious texts of the Jews are replete with reminders of their covenant with God, the consciousness of the modern day Jew cannot extricate itself from a consciousness of this “covenant” (Leviticus 26:15). However, this covenant has been violated repeatedly. This violation has contoured the Jewish awareness of their selves and echoes in their writings and other cultural and artistic productions. As the quest for the holy land continues, the ‘wandering Jew’ also seems to be beset with fears and doubts and an awareness of God’s retribution. As the Leviticus 26:15-16 constantly reminds them:

[I]f ye shall reject My statutes, and if your soul abhor Mine ordinances, so that ye will not do all My commandments, but break My covenant; I also will do this unto you: I will appoint terror over you, even consumption and fever, that shall make the eyes to fail, and the soul to languish; and ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it.

This warning seems to open a “rupture” (Finkelstein 1992, p. 3) or a *cleavage* in the very sensibilities of the Jews as they are torn apart by a perpetual sense of sin and guilt and an inveterate pride in the successful transmogrification of their travails into success. The journey and the quest are motifs that have been inherited by the Jews, and cannot be dissevered from their awareness. Kushner’s *Angels in America* begins with references to the Jewish journey in the speech by Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz:

So I do not know her and yet I know her. She was ... not a person but a whole kind of a person, the ones who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania — and how we struggled, and how we fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up *here*... in the melting pot where nothing melted. ... You do not live in America. No such place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak Shtetl... You can never make the crossing that she made, for such Great Voyages in this world do not any more exist. But every day of your lives the miles that voyage between that place and this one you cross. Every day. You understand me? In you that journey is (Kushner 2010, p. 17).

Like Rabbi Chemelwitz even the most secular Jews reflect an awareness of these motifs in their literary works. Whether it is liturgical poetry produced by medieval Jewish writers like Moses Ibn Ezra, or Ibne Gebirol, or the contemporary Jewish American writers like Bellow, Kushner or Gandal, the journey in search of some ideal establishes the essential substratum of their works. Yet, to simply connect these motifs with religious sensibilities and awareness would be to impose an erroneous simplification on a difficult idea, that is, how to determine the Jewish elements in the writings by writers of Jewish origins (Finkelstein 1992) who are by no means practicing Jews.

Finkelstein, while quoting Harold Bloom, offers an pertinent analysis in this regard:

‘The wandering people has taught itself and others the lesson of wandering meaning, a wandering that has compelled a multitude of changes in the modes of interpretation available to the West.’ I am deeply impressed by the endurance and applicability of this notion, which once again strikes me as the kind of idea that is more pertinent to modern Jewish writing than any normative belief. Wandering and transformation imply process, movement, change of state (1992, p.4).

While reading this statement in the context of contemporary Jewish American writers, one cannot deny the fact that this category of literature is indeed in a state of flux, a transformation as it absorbs the socio-political developments that are contouring its sphere of existence. Despite that, the ideas of exile and uprootedness seem to be indelibly etched in the writings of these Jewish American writers. These ideas branch out into notions of powerlessness and inadequacy as is highlighted by Gershom Scholem:

The magnitude of the Messianic idea corresponds to the endless powerlessness in Jewish history during all the centuries of exile, when it was unprepared to come forward onto the plane of world history. There's something preliminary, something provisional about Jewish history; hence its inability to give of itself entirely... There is something grand about living in hope, but at the same time there is something profoundly unreal about it. It diminishes the singular worth of the individual, and he can never fulfil himself, because the incompleteness of his endeavours eliminates precisely what constitutes its highest value. Thus in Judaism the Messianic idea has compelled a life lived in deferment, in which nothing can be done definitively, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished. (Qtd. in Finkelstein 26).

It is this consciousness of a lack of achievement that tends to make the Jews an exclusive set of people, engaged in a journey in its varying forms. While Kushner modifies this journey as a transcendental journey across the realm of a divided self in *Angels in America*, Gandal presents it as a temporal journey for Sam Franklin in search of his Messiah, Mary Jane, towards whom he harbours a deep love that is mingled with guilt. A close scrutiny of this emotional melange experienced by Franklin is reflective of the Jewish connection with God — as a blend of love and guilt. Moreover, in Kushner's *Angels in America*, the characters are beset with a sense of “profound displacement” (2010, p. 198), trying to answer the “call of migratory things” (2010, p. 149) which is also mired in a sense of guilt:

**Prior:** It's 1986 and there's a *plague*, half my friends are dead and I'm only thirty-one (Kushner 2010, p. 181).

This consciousness of sin and displacement sets the Jewish writers apart from other writers working in the canon. Even if a Jewish American writer is not a practicing Jew but a secular Jew, his writings also reflect the same sense of loss and exile blended with a sense of exploration that the freedom of exile offers. Hence, a dichotomy is observed in Jewish American writings, between a sense of pride and a sense of lack.

However, while the *Old Testament's* narratives about the Jews' Exodus from Egypt contour their awareness of their selves, the more recent history of the Jews has also become an added signifier of their perception of their selves as Jews. References to Russia, Eastern Europe and countries like Poland and the Ukraine and Germany, all bear testimony to the Jewish trek across vast geographical and metaphorical landmasses peppered with stereotypical opprobrium, marginalisation and rejection. Jewish American literature plays on the metaphors and historical sense provided by these journeys as Jews from different ethnic backgrounds came together in the United States of America. In this context, shared experiences bound them together as they endeavoured to integrate into the American society. References to the World Wars, ghettos and Hitler are strewn across narratives produced by Jewish American writers, thereby accentuating their sense of victimhood as well as exclusivity.

### **The Jewish Sense of Exclusivity**

Since story telling is essentially a tradition handed down by the Jews to make sense of life, Jewish writers throw light on their exclusive reality as Jews and through various modes of storytelling. The art of storytelling became a means for them to transcend the barriers of exclusivity and to percolate into the realm of the Gentiles. Again, one notices a polarity as they strive to integrate and yet remain separate. It is for this reason that the consciousness of Jewish exclusivity is a problem with which many Jewish American writers have to contest. Gandal's protagonist Sam Franklin is vociferously told by his grandmother that there is "no such thing as the Jewish mafia", he intimates the readers, "Jews were the chosen people. They did no wrong. It was a very touchy subject" (2002 p. 119). It is felt that Sam Franklin is not perhaps as passionate about the Jewish image, yet he is exposed to the sense of Jewish singularity, despite not displaying a particular allegiance to this sense.

We were force-fed impossible role-models. "Spinoza, Einstein, Freud, even Marx", our grandmother will repeat over and over, like a prayer. ... "All Jewish." Other times our grandmother would say, "Christ was Jewish too; remember that". We were encouraged to take out books from the temple library, which was filled with stories or biographies of unimaginably great Jews" (Gandal 2002, p. 120).

However, this sense of community emanating out of their assumptions of exclusivity expresses itself primarily through family connections in the

writings of many Jewish American writers. The Jews lay great stress on the family matrix because a family is the basic unit of a social setup, what an atom is to a molecule. Hence, the narrator in *The Bellarosa Connection* can understand the pivotal importance of Sorella for her family, as he states:

I understood Sorella: the object of her researches was to assist her husband. He was alive today because a little Jewish promoter took it into his queer head to organize a Hollywood-style rescue (Bellow 1989, p. 43).

One notices that the sense of family extends itself into a sense of community, as the narrator in *The Bellarosa Connection* is compelled to listen to Jewish history:

I wasn't inclined to discuss Jewish history with her--it put my teeth on edge at first--but she overcame my resistance. ... you couldn't say no to Jewish history after what had happened in Nazi Germany. You had to listen. It turned out that as the wife of a refugee she had set herself to master the subject, and I heard a great deal from her about the technics of annihilation, the large-scale-industry aspect of it. ... Some camps were run in a burlesque style that forced you to make these connections. Prisoners were sent naked into a swamp and had to croak and hop like frogs. Children were hanged while starved, freezing slave laborers lined up on parade in front of the gallows and a prison band played Viennese light opera waltzes (Bellow 1989, pp. 42-43).

The family becomes the base for the wandering Jew to return to, a source of strength and understanding that he cannot find on the precincts outside the familial circumference. In like manner, Gandal too focuses on the family unit and the disunion that emerges when the family unit disintegrates.

The Holocaust also reverberates in the background of most Jewish American writings, becoming a functional metaphor for the marginalisation and ostracism that the Jews have historically experienced. While there are dissenting views about the Holocaust with some arguing that its impact has been over-stated, the Jews themselves consider it to be the fulcrum around which the mechanics of their contemporary political role revolves:

The only Jewish thing we got was History, and of that most abundantly the holocaust. (As far as our mother and grandmother were concerned, the initial spasm of the apocalypse had already occurred. They were essentially waiting or the other shoe to drop) (Gandal 2002, p. 59).

In Gandal's *Cleveland Anonymous* Mary Jane is the daughter of Holocaust victims who "as kids ... were found alive in piles of bodies in Auschwitz" (2002, p.7). It is this sense of a tormented past which has been incorporated into the narratives of the Jewish American writers. This element thus

distinguishes them from those writers who are only Jewish or American, and not Jewish American.

### **Historical and Religious Influences on Jewish Writings**

Even since before the Holocaust, the Jews have had a long history of marginalization, extending from Egypt to the Iberian peninsula, to Europe and finally to the United States of America. Sam Franklin in *Cleveland Anonymous* compares his serious talks with his mother with the Spanish Inquisition:

My slavish fascination with the Inquisition caused some waves at home on account of its maltreatment of Jews and of their universal expulsion from the Iberian peninsula in 1492; our grandmother's passion on the subject was such that I actually believed she was one of those who were forced to leave — along with Columbus, who was, of course, if you put two and two together, actually a Jew (Gandal 2002, p. 86).

Then again, Hans is referred to as a “heavy Teutonic presence” (Gandal 2002, p. 31), an expression that is loaded with the inveterate contempt that a Jew may have towards a German. Hans is not seen as an individual, he is seen as a scion of the German race, rendered impotent in death through castration.

Historical awareness percolates through the narratives produced by the Jewish American writers as they deal with expulsion in its various forms. This marginalisation, however, is not of a specific geographical nature only. The marginalisation of Jews has also taken place on the extensive lamina of the literary canon as they have generally been stereotyped in the mould of Shylock. Prior Walter in *Angels in America* states: “Me? I'm *stereotypical*” (Kushner 231). The children in *Cleveland Anonymous* are called “dogs” (Kushner 2010, p. 121) by “rich bullies” (Kushner 120), a derogative, anti-semitic term used with reference to Jews. Moreover, Mary Jane's comment before the Rabbi: “We're having a spiritual crisis” (Kushner 2010, p. 121) reverberates as a commentary on the spiritual crisis that most Jews were undergoing. Coming to terms with their Jewish identity has been problematic for many writers of Jewish origins and this difficulty makes their writings different from the writings produced by other writers working in the English literary canon. A certain kind of ambivalence pervades their acknowledgement of their selves as Jews. Despite that, isolating themselves from Jewry remains problematic for them, for instance, Louis in *Angels in America* questions the Rabbi:

**Louis:** Rabbi, what does the Holy Writ say about someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need?

**Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz:** Why would a person do such a thing?

**Louis:** Because he has to. [...] maybe that person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. Maybe vomit ... and sores and disease ... really frighten him, maybe ... he isn't so good with death.

**Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz:** The Holy Scriptures have nothing to say about such a person (Kushner 2010, p. 31).

Religion fails to answer pivotal questions for this gay Jew as he gropes around, looking for something to satisfy his innate paucity that comes with his breaking away from the traditional gender norms imposed by the society he lives in. Despite that, religion remains a prominent presence in most Jewish American writings.

While Louis remains distant from his Jewish sensibility, he cannot totally discard it and guilt is something he constantly lives with. Religion, whether practiced or not, is an essential signifier for both Louis and Sam Franklin. Louis clearly states in *Angels in America*:

*Power* is the object, not being tolerated. Fuck assimilation. But I mean in spite of all this the thing about America, I think, is that ultimately we're different from every other nation on earth, in that, with people here of every race, we can't... Ultimately what defines us isn't race, but politics. Not like any European country where there's an insurmountable fact of a kind of racial, or ethnic, monopoly, or monolith, like all Dutchmen, I mean Dutch people, are well, Dutch, and the Jews of Europe were never Europeans. (Kushner 2010, p. 96; Emphasis in Original).

The idea of being a sinner and hence meant to be penalised through sickness and plague is a notion that is a part of Louis' Jewish heritage. His religion thus becomes a signifier that sets him apart from other human beings. According to Bellow "The religion of the Jews has appeared to the world as divinely inspired history. The message of the Old Testament, however, cannot be easily separated from its stories and metaphors" (2002, p. 15).

Both religion and history add strength to the element of memory which active and pulsating, that arches back in time and reconstructs itself in the context of the present. The works of Bellow and Gandal substantiate this claim. For example, Sam Franklin goes back in time, and activates the past as a parallel narrative to his situation in the present and offers foresight for the future in *Cleveland Anonymous*:

For the longest time, Mary Jane and I had no idea what we wanted to be when we grew up. In fact, we had no future plans at all... We had heard it said a thousand times at the dinner table that houses would be too expensive to purchase by the time we grew up. It was only a small step of logic to fathom that the future would hold no houses at all (Gandal 2002, p. 56).

This observation proves to be prophetic since Sam burns down his home in order to get to New York, the fire becoming a sort of a beacon for him to signal his search for Mary Jane, the girl who goes into self-exile because she had been



violated by their Gentile step-father. Interestingly, the metaphor of exile and violation has been imbibed from history, as Mary Jane, the avatar of God for Sam Franklin goes into exile. In order to find her, he too must go into Exile, to bring her back. In a way, this personal drama replicates the collective religio-historical saga of the Jews, since *The Talmud*, “speculates that when the Jew went into exile, God too was exiled” (Wirth-Nesher 2003, p. 27).

### **Jewish American Writers and the American Experience**

While American Jews had periodically migrated to the United States of America with the hope of getting the freedom to practice their own traditional way of life, assimilation into the American way of life did not prove to be easy. Despite their “religious pluralism” (Elazar 1995, p. 42), a number of problems inherent in the religious consciousness of the American Jewry surfaced. For instance as conservative Jewish outlooks waned and ethnicity occupied a back stage since, according to Elazar, the ethnically bound Jews would congregate in synagogues, the social outlook of the American Jewry underwent a radical change as well. The question became whether a Jew could remain a Jew if he discarded affiliations to his Jewish religion, as Cynthia Ozick writes in her essay ‘America Towards Yavneh’:

The secular Jew is a figment; when a Jew becomes a secular person he is no longer a Jew. This is especially true for makers of literature. It was not only an injunction that Moses uttered when he said we would be a people attentive to holiness, it was a description and a destiny (2002, p. 28).

While her stand point seems rather extreme, literature proves that there are Jews who are less zealous in their religious outlook. Preferring to integrate into the American community, they have never consciously used their Jewish roots as the identity marker for themselves. Despite that, their efforts to assimilate in the American society were hampered by anti-Semitism both on the streets of the USA as well as in the political domains. Suspected of anti-patriotism, Jews were even vilified for national apostasy. However, when the second World War gave them a sense of community, the Jews gradually penetrated the political field and became a major force in the post-War decades, lending support to the creation of the state of Israel. Despite their marginalization, most Jews were able to rally around a central cause. However, not all Jews fell into this fold. Embracing the American notions of free thought, some of them acted and thought independently of the Jewish American community. For instance, Louis, in *Angels in America* vocalizes his support for the Palestinian cause. Owing to his being doubly marginalized as being a Jew and a homosexual, Louis sympathizes with other marginalized people and thus distances himself from the Zionist movement. On the other hand, many Jewish American writers do not seem to have pro-Zionist leanings; despite that, Bellow’s association with Israel does manifest itself in his writings. For example, the narrative of

*The Bellarosa Connection* primarily reaches its resolution in modern-day Israel.

Toward the close of the fifties they went to Israel, and as it happened, business had brought me to Jerusalem too. The Israelis, who culturally had one of everything in the world, had invited me to open a memory institute (1989, p. 43).

Additionally, American national politics are also interlaced in their narratives. Ethel Rosenberg emerges as a powerful character in Kushner's *Angels in America*. While Roy has looked into the "Stygian" heart of the world and its "miasma", Ethel Rosenberg appears out of the miasma as a manifestation of his own "sinful" (2010, pp. 213-214; Emphasis in Original) nature, warning the dying Roy who has "forced [his] way into history" (2010, p. 118). Roy is not merely a homosexual Jew he is also on the inside of the American political system. Ethel Rosenberg stand as a symbol of the failure of the American system and the paranoia of the McCarthy era, and Roy was a participant of this miscarriage of justice.

In addition to politics, Jewish American writers like Gandal and Kushner display an awareness of social issues as well which conveys the message that although they are different, yet they remain participants in the American way of life. The American experience and its flaws is something Kushner participates in when he highlights the AIDS epidemic of the 80s. Gandal also speaks as an American when he presents the homeless women, the untouchable persons who have been sheltered by Mary Jane. Ruminating on the disparity within human nature Sam Franklin thinks, "Maybe we live in a world where arson and murder are easier to accept than taking people in off the street" (Gandal 2002, p. 272).

Hence, when it comes to a presentation of the American experience and the participation of the Jews in that experience, one notices a variety of patterns that reflect the inherent confusion and division in the average Jewish American writer and his experiences in the American system of life. Shaped by the divides and socio-political tensions framing their world, the writings of Bellow, Gandal and Kushner portray the Jewish American identity as a site of negotiation among multiple poles and allegiances. A state of indefiniteness percolates the Jewish sense of self and Jewish American writers endeavor to humanize Jews portraying them in all their individual diversity.

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