

Impact and Relevance of Ethnicity in Isaac Bashevis Singer's Enemies: A Love Story

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Abstract

'Ethnicity' commonly refers to the physical, social, or cultural distinctions a group of people share because of their ancestry and place of birth. Ethnic qualities include physical appearance, language, religious beliefs, or social customs in any combination. 'Ethnicity' is the primary unit of social organization in some areas of the world. In parts of Asia and Africa, ethnicity is more important than other measures of difference, such as class and nationality.

The American Jews form undoubtedly one of the most gifted ethnic groups in American society who have excelled remarkably in the field of science, technology, commerce and trade and have contributed tremendously towards the enrichment of American literature, especially because the Jews are not only an ancient race deeply rooted in the Talmudic tradition but also because they have survived the worst genocide in history as an ethnic group. The Jew writers like Bernard Malamud, Henry Roth, Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, J.D. Salinger, Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Leon Uris, Nathaniel West, John Updike, Edgar Lewis, Wallant, Chain Potok, Herbert Gold, Arthur Miller, Joseph Heller, and E.L. Doctorow, etc. have written interesting novels which throw considerable light on Jewish life style, tradition and culture. Most of these writers are the survivors of Holocaust. The theme of victimization and alienation, cultural dilemma, diaspora, lost roots, quest for love and peace, search for social identity and struggle for adjustment largely appear in their writings.

The objective of this research project is to highlight not only the ethnicity of the Jews but also to show how ethnic groups go a long way to enrich the life, society and literature of a great nation that comprises of several communities and ethnic groups.

Keywords: victimization and alienation, Holocaust, cultural dilemma, quest for love and peace, search for social identity and struggle for adjustment.

Introduction

The history of Jews, the so called "chosen people of God," reveals that they have always been chosen either for persecution or discrimination. The horrendous blood-bath in Germany, the organized killing in the shape of pogroms in Russia, deprivation of rights in Rumania, political oppression and religious persecution in other countries have compelled the Jews to flee from their homelands to different places like nomads in a state of unsettlement and unrest. Until 1948, they had no country of their own. The Second World War (1939-1945) shattered man's faith in God and religion and it seemed that satanic powers ruled the world. The millions of the Jews who had been living in European countries for centuries and had become a part of the social fabric were rudely shaken to face a never ending nightmare of the Holocaust. They were mercilessly prosecuted by Nazi Germans who wanted to wipe off the Jew race entirely from Europe and elsewhere.

Millions of Jews perished in concentration camps and those who were lucky enough, sought asylum in America. A great exodus followed but the memories of the Holocaust continued to give nightmares to the Jews. Besides it was not easy for them to accept and adjust in changed circumstances and to adopt America as their homeland.

Enemies: A Love Story, published in English in 1972, is a novel which deals with the complexities of human relationships and shows how traumatic and nightmarish experiences shatter the brain and psyche of a normal human being and turn him into a psychological wreck tormented by obsessive fear and uncertainty of future. The title of the novel is quite misleading. It is not a romantic tale where 'lovers live happily ever after' but a deeply moving story of the Jews who survived the Holocaust and sought asylum in America, the country of mythical opportunities or Palestine, the country of their forefathers when re-settling in Europe became a far cry. Unfortunately, they were not welcomed in either of these places. The British, who held the mandate over Palestine at the time, were reluctant to resettle the survivors for political reasons. The United States was also not swift in granting entry visas to the remnants of the European Jewry. Thousands of survivors were kept for years in displaced person's camps prior to acceptance by America. Nevertheless, these temporary delays and artificially imposed obstacles could not prevent most of the Jews from finally settling in the country of their choice. This problem of the settlement of the survivors is the background of Singer's *Enemies: A Love Story*.

Discussion

This novel is a poignant tale of a Jew named Herman Broder, who is living in Brooklyn, (America) after having escaped Nazi persecution in Poland during the Second World War. His father, wife and children are reported killed by the Nazis but he is saved by his Gentile maid Yadwiga, who worked in his home due to poverty. She always loved him silently and hid him in a hayloft in Lipsk for three years before getting over to Germany and then to America. They are not formally married yet live as husband and wife. Both are unable to wipe off the nightmarish past from their memories. In

his reveries, Herman imagines that the Nazis have occupied America, so tries to escape from them. Yadwiga wants to adopt Jewish faith and desires a child from Herman, but he takes care not to make her pregnant. Herman earns his living by selling books on Jewish religion and also works as a writer for Rabbi Milton Lampert, who has amassed a fortune from the real estate, was separated from his wife but is again living with her. Herman does not give his telephone number to Rabbi Lampert, who is doubtful that Herman has a wife somewhere. Herman stays with his mistress Masha in Bronx when he is on his trips to sell books. Masha survived years in the ghetto and concentration camps and now works as a cashier in a cafeteria in Tremont Avenue. When the Nazis invaded Poland, Herman was going to see his parents in Tzivkev while his wife Tamara had gone with both children to her family in Nalenczew. He met Masha and ShifrahPuah in Germany where Masha was married to Dr. Leon Tortshiner, a scientist who is now married to a wealthy widow.

Suffering has made Masha cynical and bitter and her faith in benevolent God is shattered. ShifrahPuah mourns for her husband and parents who were all exterminated in the ghettos and camps. She walks around all night and doesn't even bother to switch on the light and imagines that a German is standing over her with a gun. ShifrahPuah remains a devout Jew and prays three times a day. Tamara, who survived in Holocaust though her children were killed, tells Herman that in the German camps, Nazis trampled her mother under their boots and wanted to rape her (Tamara) but she was having her period. Women could be won for a loaf of bread or a few potatoes. Tamara blames God for remaining silent on the suffering of the Jews.

Enemies: A Love Story deals with the Nazi persecution of the Jews during the World War II, Jewish diaspora and ethnicity. The novel portrays four types of Jews who experienced the Holocaust. The first type is the characters like Herman and Yadwiga, who are unable to overcome the nightmarish past of the Holocaust and remain in constant fear that it may repeat itself. Whenever Herman reads about the sufferings of the Jews, he desperately plans to seek revenge from the Nazis by destroying their whole armies and wants to "bring to trial all those who had

been involved in the annihilation of the Jews.” (p. 132) Herman also imagines that America is destined to destroy like Poland and the whole universe is in the process of explosion. The second type of the Jews is the characters like Masha, who retain the memory of their suffering, become cynical and skeptical and try to lose themselves in sex and liquor. Masha reveals to Herman that the Nazis tortured her so much in the camps that she cannot do anything of her own at her free will now. She blames God for the killing of the Jews in Europe: “How do we know what tomorrow will bring? It can happen again. Slaughtering Jews is part of nature. Jews must be slaughtered – that’s what God wants.” (p. 37) The third type of the Jews is the characters like ShifrahPuah, who retain their unflinching faith in God despite their suffering for which they blame their own sins. She reads nothing in the newspapers except the descriptions of the survivors of ghetto and concentration camps. The fourth type of Jews is like Leon Tortshiner and Rabbi Lampert, who are essentially practical and materialistic in outlook with a talent to overcome all shocks and hindrances and achieve material success. These Jews are pro-Gentile in outlook and they are the persons who evoke jealousy and hatred in non-Jews against the Jew community. Leon Tortshiner’s whole family was killed by the Nazis and he also lived through the war, the camps and the hunger but he never regrets.

Singer’s Holocaust survivors can never forget the slaughter of their people. Tamara, Masha and ShifrahPuah are compulsive re-tellers of their stories. Holocaust impinges so cruelly upon their present lives as to negate them. Ghosts of their former selves, they can only relive the past and despair of the future. ShifrahPuah’s “whoever has tasted death has no more use for life,” (p. 36) applies in varying degrees to Masha and Tamara as well. All the three bear the guilt of their own survival and the stigma of Nazi hatred. The bayonet scar on ShifrahPuah’s cheek, the inability of Masha to bear children and the bullet lodged in Tamara’s body are permanent souvenirs of their sojourn in hell. Each woman’s response to her experience of the Holocaust represents a version of Jewish survival. ShifrahPuah believes that God took all the pious Jews and that she survived only because of her sins; Tamara comfortable in her room in New

York, imagines that she “betrayed all the Jews in Europe.” ShifrahPuah called “back from the other world” by Masha, and Tamara, returned from the dead, derive great moral authority by virtue of their “resurrection.” Even the cynical Herman admits that everything that ShifrahPuah touches is “holy” and that whatever Tamara says must be believed. Tamara’s uncle Reb Abraham NissenYaroslover, who fled to America only weeks before Hitler’s invasion of Poland, claims special status for all Holocaust survivors. To this pious Hasid, whose own faith has been shaken, anyone who had witnessed the carnage has reason not to “believe in the Almighty and His mercy” (p. 245). The conflict between faith and doubt that plagues Reb Abraham Nissen extends to nearly every major character in *Enemies*. As always, the clash between belief and denial is reflected in his protagonist’s inner life. Herman Broder is another of Singer’s moral schizophrenics who wishes to believe but is unable to do so. Like earlier Singer heroes whose compulsive womanizing stems from alienation; Herman employs hedonism as a mode of evasion.

Children are conspicuously absent from *Enemies* but are unfailingly invoked in the Holocaust stories of the major characters. Jewish childhood, rarely happy in the best of times, epitomizes the tragic dimensions of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. To an endlessly besieged people, children represent the only hope of continuity, so much so that reproduction is enjoyed upon by traditional Jews as a sacred duty. The murder of the children was therefore the most devastating aspect of Hitler’s war against the Jews. Holocaust survivors are ambivalent about children, torn between the desire to restore Jewish losses and the fear of bringing innocents into an evil world. ShifrahPuah wants a grandchild, “someone to name after the murdered Jews” (p. 184), and Yadwiga finally bears Herman’s child. But the former is a saint; the latter a Gentile. More typical of the reactions of Singer’s Holocaust survivors to the prospect of child bearing is Tamara’s “What for? So that the Gentiles will have someone to burn?” (p.101) Yadwiga’s pregnancy is, of course, accidental: Herman took care not to make Yadwiga pregnant. In a world in which one’s children could be dragged away from their mother and shot dead, one had no right to have more children” (p. 7).

Theories about the inherent evil of human nature, ever present in Singer's fiction, crop up incessantly in *Enemies*. Expanding the horror stories of Holocaust survivors into general conclusions about human nature is the task of several otherwise gratuitous passages. Typical of these is the long monologue delivered by Leon Tortshiner, during his meeting with Herman in a cafeteria: "I believe so to speak, in an evolution in reverse, the last man on this earth will be both a criminal and a madman" (p. 163). Such theories reflect Singer's view of history as cyclical nightmare and the Holocaust as the unholy paradigm of human action. More devastating even than their conclusions about human nature are their implications about the nature of God. Even the pious Reb Abraham Nissen cannot accept the position of orthodox Jews "who tried to pretend that the Holocaust in Europe had never taken place" (p. 245). For Herman, Masha and Tamara the Holocaust is evidence that God has broken His covenant with His chosen people. Their several theories mirror the belief, commonly held by survivors that at the very least God averted His face from the Jews in their time of greatest need: at the worst, He willed their destruction. "Almighty sadist," Herman calls God. (p. 205) "Jews must be slaughtered – that's what God wants," cries Masha (p. 37). Both consider the possibility that Hitler presides in heaven or that if a merciful God exists, "then he was only a helpless goblet, a kind of heavenly Jew among the heavenly Nazis" (p.123). Tamara's suffering and the murder of her children have convinced her that "the merciful God in whom we believed does not exist" (p. 81). The sight of children going "to their deaths like saints" proves only that "souls exist; it's God who doesn't" (p. 82). If history, as represented archetypally by the Holocaust, conforms to a divine blueprint, then it constitutes a shattering indictment of God. Either God is present in history and therefore cruel or unfeeling; or He is absent from history and is therefore non-existent or dead. Masha claims that Hitler carried out God's diabolical plan to destroy the Jews: "The true God hates us, but we have dreamed up an idol who loves us and has made us His chosen people.... the Gentile makes Gods of stone and we of theories" (p. 110).

Lacking a community, Jews retain their faith by revivifying a vanished past. Yet without communal reinforcement will and memory cannot guarantee the survival of the people. Individual gestures such as Reb Abraham Nissen's wish to be buried on the Mount of Olives and Masha's insistence on a grave next to her mother's are limited affirmations at best, non-repeatable and void of future application. Laden with the imagery of death, such gestures function chiefly as reminders that a viable Jewish community no longer exists. This loss of a Jewish world occasions a marked thematic shift in *The Family Moskat* also, where Singer confronts the Holocaust directly. Yadwiga's daughter is born the "night before Shevuot," the joyous festival commemorating the giving of the Torah to Israel on Mount Sinai and the offering of the first fruits of the wheat harvest to God. Besides its obvious promise of the Jewish continuity the birth reaffirms the covenant with God that Herman had broken. Named Masha, the baby is the symbolic linchpin binding the Jewish past to the Jewish future. That Jewish hope must be vested in a child born to a convert is an irony previously employed by Singer in *The Slave*. In *Enemies* only Yadwiga is inspired by the faith that was burned out of Jewish Holocaust survivors. It is only Yadwiga, who wants "to have a Jewish child," and is able to shoulder the moral burden of preserving the Jewish people. Her faith is the antithesis of Herman's faithlessness, her affirmation the antidote to his denial. Yadwiga and little Masha, along with Tamara, form the nucleus of a reborn Jewish community. Fittingly, they live in the very apartment vacated by Reb Abraham Nissen, whose bookstore devoted to Judaica, Tamara maintains. Their symbolic reconstitution of the family invokes the ancient Jewish formula for survival. Only by the multiplication of such mini-communities can Jewish losses be offset and Judaism be preserved.

Herman belongs to the "half of his people" who "had been tortured and murdered" whereas Rabbi Lampert was with the other half, "giving parties" (p. 213). Neither does the younger generation of American Jews escape Singer's biting satire. He describes an episode in an upstate New York resort in which a Holocaust survivor is brutally insulted by a mindless and cynical waiter. One woman, a recent

arrival in America, sent back her serving waiter and the waiter asked, "By Hitler you are better" (p. 120). Herman believes that the past should be remembered; without it one can neither understand his present state nor can retain his real Jewish identity. Those who forget, commit an outright sin against the history of the Jewish people. Herman is simply not able to perceive how people, especially those who went through the Holocaust, can go on living as if nothing happened:

In what way are they my brothers and sisters? What does their Jewishness consist of? What is my Jewishness? They all had the same wish to assimilate as quickly as possible and get rid of their accents. He belonged neither to them nor to the American, Polish, or Russian Jews (p. 114).

Herman Broder dreams but his dreams are a fusion of imaginary and real nightmares. Herman Broder is walking a thin line between life and death, present and past, reality and fantasy, truth and deception, art and pseudo-art, and finally, Judaism and worldliness. One careless step can cause his downfall. Even before the Second World War, Herman Broder was not exactly a happy man. His marriage failed – for an enlightened Jew and devotee of Schopenhauer, marriage was not a viable institution. Nationalism and religion were an anathema to him. Consequently he became an exile among exiles, lonely, despised by his family, disregarded by the traditional Jews and sneered at by his fellow intellectuals. The Holocaust adds another dimension to Herman's exile in America. His shield of cynicism, behind which he was hiding for a long time, is shattered. Against his own will he finds himself married three times

In America, Herman returns to his writing, though only as a ghost-writer. He writes for Rabbi Lampert, doing a job rather than engaging in a creative process. A ghost, a somnambulist, an apparition, he carries out all his activities as if in a daze, though he refuses to submit to total destruction. He tries to see the rationale behind his actions; yet when he finds it faulty he nevertheless goes on performing these actions. His incessant activity becomes a means of fending off dark and misanthropic thoughts. Immersing himself in activities he knows to be purposeless, he can go on living without submitting

to the suicidal urges that his thoughts and the reality around him generate. Even his three marriages are a fence behind which he is hiding, as if he were back in his Polish hayloft. Very often amazed by Tamara and Masha's behaviour, Herman cannot understand why both women are so attracted to him, why they are taking care of him even though he has hardly brought any joy to their lives. "What was it they all wanted?" he asks on one occasion. His answer to his question applies not only to these two female survivors but to himself as well. Herman says that they want "to forget for a while their loneliness and the inevitability of death" (p. 94) which is exactly what Herman desires. His tragedy is that he does not have a sense of belonging; he is uprooted, a branch cut off a tree. In his recurrent and extreme states of despair, suicide appears the only logical way out of his misery. But as Singer points out, he lacks the "courage to commit suicide," and all he can do is shut his eyes, stop his ears, close his mind and live like a worm" (p. 19). Singer's overall design, though, keeps Herman on the tight-rope of existence for as long as it takes to explore all the options of survival.

Herman's greatest fear was his fear of again becoming a father. He was afraid of a son and more afraid of a daughter, who would be an even stronger affirmation of the positivism he rejected, the bondage that has no wish to be free, the blindness that wouldn't admit it was blind." (p. 149) Both Yadwiga and Masha, his two wives, beg him for a child; invariably he answers no. Yet despite his stubbornness, the Gentile (Yadwiga) who converts to Judaism becomes pregnant and gives birth to a daughter. Life giving forces transcend Herman's destructive impulses. Even Masha, a walking monument to Nazi atrocities, the woman who embodies all the devastating effects of the Holocaust on the Jewish people, wants to become a mother. Both Yadwiga and Masha become symbols of the Great Mother who is the generator and nourisher of life and despite all destructive forces at work, the process of procreation should not come to an end. Besides killing the Jewish men, women and children in the concentration camps, Hitler embarked upon a programme of sterilizing Jew men with a view to wipe the entire race. Yadwiga, who has embraced Judaism, is more zealous in her attitude of propagating the Jew race. But Singer denies Masha

this sacred right of womanhood. Her womb is barren; her pregnancy is a sham. Too similar to Herman, she contributes to his downfall. Masha is the claim of the past upon Herman.

Herman's thoughts coupled with those of Masha can generate only one outcome, which is death. To counter the self-destructive elements among the Jews in this novel, Singer introduces two minor characters, Reb Abraham Nissen and his wife, who despite what happened to the Jews; see one way only for their survival. Reb Abraham Nissen says, "When people stop believing in the Creator, anarchy prevails.... the Torah says, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth but that is why there is a Torah." (p. 79) It is not surprising then, that the older couple finally find their peace only when they move to the land of their fathers. This is the way to true survival and transcendence of exile, when all other means are exhausted.

Singer's novel ends on a semi-optimistic note. Herman vanishes, as is indeed foreshadowed at the beginning of the book; but Yadviga, who calls herself the daughter of Israel, gives birth to a baby girl. She pointedly names her Masha. This name has a symbolic meaning: the very fact of the girl's birth is the affirmation of life; her name is a tribute to the Holocaust victims. The past and the present can co-exist and be balanced; they do not exclude but complete each other.

Conclusion

Isaac Bashevis Singer has achieved international fame and recognition for highlighting the relevance of ethnic factor in global literature and more precisely for enriching American literature. He has succeeded in presenting the ethnic perspective without any bias or prejudice against any race, religion or nation. In fact the literary talent and excellence of Singer functions on two levels. At one level he is the spokespersons of his community and race who describes graphically and authentically the pain and trauma of racial discrimination and persecution suffered by his community, and on the other and higher level he acts as creative writers pre-occupied with the drama of life, the complexity of character and the intricacies of human relationships. He has a comprehensive understanding of the socio-

cultural, economic and political scenario of the twentieth century's modern life which has influenced communal relations in society and is conscious of his social responsibility.

Herman Broder is not only a Jew who went through the nightmare and trauma of Nazi persecution but he is also a man who is unable to overcome his obsessive fear and weakness for Masha which clouds his judgment and dissuades him from right action. In other words Singer lays more emphasis on individual crisis to bring out the 'human element' and the racial factor becomes secondary. As a matter of fact he presents psychological realism and as such does not hesitate to present the changing value system within their own community and race which has a far reaching implication for society and communal harmony. *Enemies: A Love Story* portrays this peculiar Jewish dilemma against the background of the Holocaust which shattered their faith in the benevolence of God and turned them into psychological wrecks seeking to sustain life at any cost and clinging desperately to whatever sensual pleasure is available to them.

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