

Displacement and Disintringation of Jews in Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Slave*

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ABSTRACT

Isaac Bashevis Singer is a Polish born novelist, journalist and translator who writes in Yiddish. He was brought up in religious atmosphere. He has witnessed all the atrocities on Jews, Transgenders, Homosexuals and weaker Gender by Nazis. He lost his mother and younger brother in Holocaust while he was in exile. The world of Jews that was destroyed by Nazis came to life by the writings of Singer. His imaginative and inspirational writings have helped a lot of his kind to come out of the chaos due to displacement. He writes about the broken and shattered people who lost everything including their self-reliance because someone out there thought that Jews could over power Christians. His language in his writings is the language of sufferers and *The Slave* is the story of the same sufferer Jacob who belongs to Josefov and is displaced. He is enslaved by some tribe who call themselves as Christians. Jacob is a young and highly learned man who was made a slave in 17th century Poland. The main focus of Singer in this novel is to depict the fate of a Jew who gets involved in endless misfortunes to save a gentle soul of his own. Jacob passes through various stages of freedom and slavery. His journey of life is dominated by his committed slavery to God. He is conscious of being a slave and this feeling tortures him day and night; torments his soul as he cannot even pray to God. The plot of *A Slave* of Singer is divided into three sections entitled: "Wanda, Sarah and The Return."

KEY WORDS: Displacement, Alienation, Depression, Slavery, Degradation, Nihilism, Uncertainty, Isolation.

It is very imperative to understand the concept of home given by Bhabha who observes that people who migrate to other lands suffer displacement and fragmentation. The Jews were the victims of the atrocities of

the Nazis and they were forced to flee Europe. Six million Jews were killed in the Jewish Holocaust. Their life was messy and many of them lost homes; families and business. They migrated to different countries and many of them shifted to America for survival. They were forced to give up their cultural norms in their struggle and survival. Bashevis Singer was also the victim of displacement and division. He migrated to America and led a miserable life in the early years since he had no regular employment. Most of the characters in his works suffer alienation and displacement because of homelessness.

Singer has given the historical setting of the novel *The Slave*, (1962) the aftermath of Chmielnicki massacre it is clearly referred in the beginning of the plot. Singer traces the roots of the novel from the Origin as Jacob is a righteous character and Singer uses allegorical technique to intensify the realistic elements of the Bible. Jacob is presented as a symbol of the Jewish people and his psychological trauma is the outcome of moral and spiritual disconnection from God. The cultural values of the 1920s were subverted by death, trauma and fear and this subversion of values is the main focus of Bashevis Singer. Cathy Caruth asserts that trauma is experienced and witnessed through "a response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth 91). The strongest spiritual influence can be observed in *The Slave* of Isaac Bashevis Singer. The novel is concerned with the problem of free will as the title of the novel suggests. Singer also takes up the theme of lust and human degradation. Singer uses the natural word as a source of inspiration and inner knowledge. Jacob struggles in his life to learn the significance of free will. Jacob realizes "that how deep were the wounds" (106). Singer put forward the problems and tension of the deserted wives, Cossack brides forced conversions; they witnessed the horrors of genocide and Singer depicts the traumatic experiences of the Jews in the novel *The Slave*.

The Slave analyzes the internal and external pressures of Jacob as he struggles to forge identification in an alien land. Jacob is young and highly learned man who has been made a slave in 17th century Poland. Jacob is seen trapped in two major religious communities, one Christian and the other Jewish. The main focus of Singer in this novel is to depict the fate of a Jew who becomes the victim of fragmentation and displacement. His journey of life is dominated by his committed slavery to God. His search for love and God is the main focus of Singer as Nili Wachtel (1977) says: "Jacob breaks a wrong, naïve passive slavery, in order to choose for himself a right, sober and active slavery" (186). He is conscious of being a slave and this feeling

tortures him day and night; torments his soul as he cannot even pray to God: “Thou hast not made me a slave” (Singer 10). Ironically, Jacob is not only a slave to God and his master, but also a slave to his emotions and passions. Jacob’s hometown was burnt by Cossacks and his family was killed in a brutal manner. Jacob lives alone in the hopeless circumstances of slavery; he lives alone on top of mountain next to a Christian village. He is always preoccupied by the old memories of his wife and children. Jacob is a social outcast and herd’s only cows. He has to go downtown everyday to get food and he observes the rituals and traditions of Christianity. Root further observes that alienation is a “threat to psychological safety, security, or survival” (241).

The plot of *A Slave* of Singer is divided into three sections entitled: “Wanda, Sarah and “The Return.” The Wanda part of the novel depicts the displacement of Jacob. Jacob lives on the top of a mountain where the semblance of civilization is completely lost. The village down the mountain maintains some shallow appearance of Christianity. The local priest is a corrupt drunkard who has grown anti-Christian. Incest is a common practice here and morality is non-existent. Jacob with his Judaism struggles to survive in a world whose goal is their obliteration. Jacob is a prisoner in exile and even in his traumatic situation he is committed to the Judaism craving the Jewish laws onto a rock. He inscribes them in his mind and writes in the granite. His love for Wanda becomes a source of psychological pain and anguish. Irving Buchen (1968) observes that in *The Slave*, “Singer has stripped Jacob of all the complexities of society and history so that we may experience directly the divinity of original creation” (Buchen 155).

Elie Wiesel (1976) once wrote that when God created man, he gave him a secret...and that secret was not how to begin again” (Wiesel 32). Jacob is confronted with a mysterious problem to reconstruct his life and the world for his survival. Jacob feels his moral responsibility to resurrect a world that is torn by the Holocaust. Jacob’s wife and children were killed by the Cossacks and he was sold to Gazdas, a tribe living in the mountains of Poland. Singer has depicted the tribal society of the mountains where Jacob lived: He is a slave of Jan Bzik and whose daughter Wanda falls in love with him. The real conflict begins when there is a psychological pressure on his soul to abandon Judaism and to get freedom from slavery But Jacob refuses to leave his religion and remains faithful to the Judaism. In the last section of the novel Jacob gives in to the sexual passions for Wanda. Finally Jacob sexually consummates his love for Wanda. Singer has used the images from the Bible and Genesis to describe the ritual of their sexual consummation. Both of them

immerse themselves in the stream ritually undergoing a symbolic union of souls. Jacob, however, is a victim of guilt though nature seems to sanction their sexual consummation next morning: “Dew covered the grass, and each droplet gleamed. Birds were singing, and in the distance a cow lowed” (70).

Wanda tells him about her relationship with her former husband Stach and Jacob tells her that: “The Torah tells how a man should conduct himself” (20). He even tells stories convincing her that even a prostitute can embrace Judaism. Jacob tries his best to control his passions and remains isolated from Wanda. His separation becomes a major cause of his frustration and depression. He is always haunted by the question: “Did the creator require the assistance of Cossacks to reveal His nature? Was this a sufficient cause to bury infants alive?” (100). Jacob suffers from alienation and according to Patrick Colin Hogan “alienation is not itself an experience one chooses to have, it is, rather, an inability, as we shall see, frequently associated with emotional and mental disintegration” (Hogan 88).

Hogan further suggests that alienation is a kind of “cultural disintegration involving a sense of alienation from all cultures, being no longer at ease in any cultures, finding a home neither in indigenous tradition nor in Europeanization” (88). Jacob’s dilemma is that he cannot forget his wife and children and he remains restless and depressed. He becomes a guilty of murder through his forgetfulness. He had witnessed horror of Chmielnicki genocide and in such a case his memory becomes a source of poignant torture. Robert Jay Lifton in his book *The Life of the Self: Toward a New Psychology* (1976) observes that “the survivor undergoes a radical but temporary diminution in his sense of actuality in order to avoid losing his sense completely and temporarily; he undergoes a reversible form of psychic death in order to avoid a permanent or psychic death” (Lifton 144). Jacob struggles to forget his wife and children in his exercise of scratching forty-three commandments and sixty nine interdictions into a rock but all these spiritual efforts prove futile as memory of death intensifies his trauma.

Jacob is a teacher and he knows Jewish law and the meaning of sinful transgression very well. He becomes a slave to his passions and keeps on making love to a gentile. In his loneliness, he thinks of Wanda in his quest for animal. He knows that he is a married man and Wanda doesn’t belong to his faith and cohabiting with her amounts to adultery with her. But it is extremely difficult for him to control his emotion and passions.

They fall in love with each other but Jacob struggles to escape and resist the temptation of Satan. Jacob interprets his powerful sense of lust and longing for sexual pleasures. He becomes slave to passions urging him to sacrifice the eternal for the temporal: “Remember this world is only a corridor; the true palace lies beyond. Don’t let yourself be barred from it the sake of a moment’s pleasure” (16). He even dreams of Wanda in his sleep and feels sleepless and restless. Freud says that the “dreams are the royal road to the unconscious” and no wonder, Wanda is the centre of his unconscious mind. She has become a part of his existence and he is ready to make sacrifice his life for her. In Jungian terms Wanda is a powerful anima for Jacob. Jung observes thus: “These drive elements which are related to life, as an unprecedented spontaneous, natural phenomenon, to the life of the instincts, the life of the flesh...” (Jung 133)

Wanda is a slave to her animus; she proposed Jacob but he is afraid of committing sin of adultery. Wanda is perplexed to know the ambiguous attitude of Jacob. She is bold and beautiful; she offers her body to him and expresses her free will to offer him cohabitation without marriage. Jacob is in a dilemma but Wanda’s intentions are clear:

She had fallen in love with the slave at first sight and though over the years they had been much together, he had stayed remote. Many times she had come to the conclusion that from this dough would come no bread, and that she was wasting her youth on him. (18)

Singer has depicted the conflict in Jacob’s soul between his idealism and his displacement. He is an outsider and leads the life of a slave. Wanda excites his repressed instincts and he knows that he is the victim of a split between his repression and passion. Wanda troubles him and makes him sleepless day and night; passions overwhelm him and many unknown ideas leap into his brain. Freud (1916) gave the theory of repression that is a normal part in the growth of human beings. In “normal life our secret desires continue to find outlet in perfectly well-adjusted individuals. But the problems arise when an individual is faced with the obstacles to satisfy his libido and experience trauma and pressure on his psyche” (Freud 350). Jacob knows that Wanda is an outsider but she transcends the savage existence of the Gazdas in her true love for Jacob. All his efforts to forget Wanda ended in despair:

His yearning stayed with him praying and studying, sleeping and walking. He knew the bitter truth: compared to his passions for Wanda, his mourning for his wife and children and his love for God were weak. (53)

In desperation Jacob searches for the loopholes in the scriptures to justify his desire for Wanda. In the Talmudic Law: “The Talmudic law stating that a man who cohabits with a gentile could be put to death by anyone in the community was only valid if there had first a warning and the adultery was seen by witness” (34). Like Dimmedale of *The Scarlet Letter* of Hawthorne, Jacob wants to establish his relations with Wanda and is not psychologically under pressure to commit adultery. His desire for Wanda is intensified by the inactivity during the rainy season. When Jacob sees her coming up on the mountain, “tears come to his eyes. Someone remembered him and cared” (53). When he looks at Wanda sleeping in the barn he raises the queries: “Had she not been created in God’s image?” (53). He takes her in his arms and enjoy the sexual pleasures for the first time. He sees Wanda in rain and darkness of the barn. He enjoys the body of Wanda but in his heart he remains restless and guilty. Singer depicts the fall of Jacob into the pit of darkness and lust:

Husband and wife had driven each other into an insane labyrinth of vice. He procured for her and she procured for him. She watched him corrupt peasant girls and he eavesdropped money for the building of churches and religious monuments. (130)

Freud (1914) argues that “an instinct for mastery” is more primordial and elementary than the general “pleasure principle” of avoiding unpleasurable experiences and seeking pleasurable experiences (147). He asks Wanda to bath in the stream because “God’s law requires it” (55). Wanda says: “I have done this for you” but Jacob says: “No, not for me, for God” (56). He is fully under the fire of passions; he lifts her in his arms and is lost in his love. He feels the power of eros to be as strong as that of Thanatos. He utters the words to himself: “For love is as strong as death, the Song of Songs and at least he understood” (57). He understands that just as death has its total power over human beings, of carrying them to a new world so it is with love. He realizes that to be totally consumed by love man has to recognize the mysteries of body. On the next morning: “he was no longer ashamed before God, but feared the ridicule of men” (57). Freud observes that the “first sexual act of a man and a woman may bring about guilt, remorse and even feelings of damnation” (350). After the sexual experience, Jacob is haunted by the terrifying metaphors of hell, miracle, love and death, guilt and damnation. Wanda is completely committed to Jacob as she declares: “Where thou goest, I go. Thy people are my people. Thy God is my God” (58). In these moments of love and sexual passions, Jacob compares Wanda with his wife Zelda who “had been a woman, but frigid and cold, forever distracted. She had been a constant stream of complaints: headaches, toothaches, cramps in stomach, and

always fearful of breaking the law” (58).. He experiences a constant state of burning with passions and the voice within his soul cried for Wanda day and night: “He returned home but his spirit remained restless” (84). The burning fire of passions remains active in him even when he is far away from her.

Jacob tries to explore the mystery of his identity in the alien land Religion and God. He thinks of Wanda and religion and these thoughts grip his psyche. He tries to explore the love of man and the love of God. He comes to the conclusion that the distinction between divine and human love is man -made. Jacob gets new awareness in his relationship with Wanda. This cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as *hegemony*, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is cultural hegemony at work that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength. Being displaced and homeless, Jacob enters the village at midnight and arrives at the back of the hut of Wanda. He is in exile from his motherland.

To conclude, Singer has depicted the fate of a Jew who becomes a slave because of the oppression of the Nazis. His relationship with Wanda is an attempt to escape the psychological trauma of his life. He enters into the hut and finds Wanda sleeping. Wanda gets the few things and goes with Jacob to spend the rest of her life with Jacob. She is true lover and she is fully committed to Jacob. The journey of Sarah from Wanda to the wife of Jacob and her new identify of a mother of a Jew raises so many questions to the Jewish community. Her feigned muteness sends shock waves to the Jews and her gentile background is a matter of concern for them. Jacob and Sarah are found in the strange situation. They put up a strong case as Sarah says: “I was born when Jacob found me” (179) advocating seriously that they belong to the same religion. Jacob learns so many things about his religion and love and the value of freedom in this world. He understands that Torah and the law are important: “But behind the law there is mercy. Without mercy, there would be no law” (202)

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