

ALIENATION OF A JEW AND ASSIMILATION OF A GENTILE IN ISAAC BASHEVIS  
SINGER'S *THE SLAVE*

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ABSTRACT

Isaac Bashevis Singer was a Polish born Jewish American novelist, essayist, and short story writer who writes in Yiddish. He was basically brought up in religious ambience. He lost his mother and younger brother in the holocaust of Nazi. He had experienced and witnessed the brutality and wickedness of the Nazis against the Jews, homosexuals and transgender. In his novels, Singer emphasizes the suffering of his characters as a result of their doubt in the existence of God. Their internal conflict between faith and doubt leads to the dissolution of their families, ultimately leading them to realize that without faith in God, they are destined for failure. Eventually, they repent and return to God. This theme is not only relevant to the characters in Singer's novels, but also to the entire universe. He writes about the struggles and sufferings caused the alienation of the Jews, due to the displacement in the world of adoption where they lost their home of origin. His novel *The Slave* tells about a Jewish man, called Jacob who lived in a small village, Josefov in Poland, he was displaced from his village and enslaved by a gentile tribe. Jacob is a young man and highly knowledgeable in terms of his religious scriptures. Chelmannisky massacre made him to be a slave. This novel depicts the endless struggles and misfortunes of the Jew, who leads an alienated life and strives to protect the life of a gentile woman, who assimilates the Jewish faith. His constant suffering made him to question the God. The true love of Wanda made her committed and assimilated the Judaism. The slave describes the alienation of a Jew and assimilation of a gentile.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Assimilation, Displacement, Slavery, Struggle, Degradation.

It is necessary to know the history of Jews were compelled to leave their home land, many of them tortured and exterminated nearly six millions of Jews were killed by the Nazi. It was the darkest moment in the entire human history, during the Second World War many millions of Jews fled to America and Europe for their survival. The displacement made them to lead miserable lives. Singer also one of the victims of displacement due to the holocaust, most of his characters encounters the alienation and suffers from cultural and religious barriers.

The novel *The Slave* (1962) was written in three parts Wanda, Sarah and The return after math of chelminisky massacre. The protagonist of the novel Jacob escapes from the massacre, later he was caught and sold to a tribe by Cossacks. Singer tried to find the root cause for the suffering of Jews; he used an allegorical technique to depict the suffering and struggle of his characters.

The alienation and isolation in a strange land bring them the psychological trauma in their lives; this psychological set of mind disconnected the Jews from God and their cultural. The anti Semitism between the Jews and gentiles practiced, however the dominant culture of their migrated land made them to assimilate the cultures of the host land.

Jacob was intensely religious, he knew Talmud and Torah he feared of the peasants whom he was sold and turned to be a slave, he worried about his identity if it is revealed to the peasants would torture and kill him as a reason he never tells anyone about his identity. He was working as a coward, living in a barn with cows in the summer. He looks like a gentile; he doesn't wear fringed garments and phylacteries. Singer distinguishes the cultural difference between the Jews and gentiles in terms of their outward appearance "Circumcision was the only sign on his body that he was a Jew" (Singer).

He struggles to retain his faith avoiding the food provided by the peasants, he strives to keep the law eating the kosher food. The alienation made to encounter many adventures, hardships and spiritual dilemmas. The unbearable difficulties make him to realize to be out of the danger and it was prison for him to lead lonely life in the mountains as a slave of peasant "He begged Almighty to redeem him from captivity and allow him live the life of a Jew once more" (09) Singer had painted a realistic picture of life. The loneliness brought him the psychological trauma, which he had overwhelming thinking in his life. The estrangement among the strangers had feared him to death, he thought of self destruction. The humiliation and exploitation had made him to lose his hope in life. "Ceaselessly he had prayed for death; he had even contemplated self-destruction. But now that mood had passed, and he had become inured to living among strangers, distant from his home, doing hard labor" (Singer, *The Slave*) the displacement placed him in hurdles and difficulties, so that he became cynical. Singer depicted the pains of displaced man in adverse situation and the pleasures of the native people clearly. Jacob's mental captivity made him to feel that he was in exile. The mental imprisonment brought him psychological trauma.

While working with the harvesters in the fields, Jacob chanted of his own ballads of different kinds and Jewish chants, all the other idolaters heard it and suspected him that he was cursing them; they posed him different questions and knew the language of his chanting. He was asked to chant repeatedly and humiliated by them. At this juncture Jacob was annoyed and felt alienated. The depiction of mental alienation is obviously shown by the writer. Though the Jacob was among the people around him but nobody gives him mental supports and understands him as he was a Jew and believer of other faith.

His master's daughter Wanda persuades him right from their meet and helps him different ways and advises him on how to live and behave with gentiles. She loves and likes his stature; she wants to leave her family and everything for Jacob. She likes to be his wife; the assimilation of Jewish faith takes place in the mind of a gentile, but Jacob had got many skeptics about the conversion and embracing the faith of his own by her, he thought "How could Wanda become a Jew? In Poland a Christian who becomes a Jewish convert was put to death; moreover, Jewish law forbade the conversion of gentiles for reasons other than faith" (36) but Wanda keeps her company with him, she insisted him many times to elope and marry her. Singer showed the intensity of the emotions of the two characters, love and fear in terms of their faiths and their relationship. She was fully occupied with his and love and faith and said, "Where thou goest, I go. Thy people are my people. Thy God is my God" (53).

Jacob is on a quest to unravel the mystery of his identity in the unfamiliar territory of religion and God. His thoughts are consumed by Wanda and religion, leading him to contemplate the love of man and the love of God. Ultimately, he concludes that the distinction between divine and human love is a construct of man. Through his relationship with Wanda, Jacob gains a new understanding of cultural leadership, a concept identified by

Gramsci as hegemony, which is essential for comprehending cultural life in the industrial West. It is this cultural hegemony that gives orientalism its enduring power. Displaced and homeless, Jacob arrives at Wanda's hut in the village at midnight, exiled from his motherland.

Now I'm dying, I want you to know the truth. You call yourself Jews but you don't obey the Torah. You pray and bow your heads but you speak evil of everyone and begrudge each other a crust of bread. Gershon, the man who rules you, is a swindler. He robbed a Jew womb the Cossacks killed and because of that his son-in-law's a rabbi. (169)

The cultural superstitions were clearly observed, leading everyone to believe that a dybbuk had entered Sarah, causing her unusual behavior. In the context, Sarah questioned all the Jews who followed the Torah, asking whether they actually read and followed it. Her words in Polish were not understood, and she expressed annoyance at the words of Jewish women. She admitted feeling forsaken by God simply because she was a gentile woman. Singer writes about the prevalent cultural and linguistic uncertainty in the situation.

'Yes, an emissary. The need in the land of Israel is great. We had a drought this year and on top of that a plague of locusts. When the Arab's in troubles, what's left for the Jews? Starvation is everywhere. And thirst. Water is bought by the cupful. Well, but the Jews all over the world are merciful. (194)

Finally, Jacob and Wanda have found redemption from the alienation and obstacles of assimilation. They have endured the challenges of cultural, linguistic, existential, and geographical alienation and assimilation. As refugees and estranged individuals, they have lived a life of loneliness. "In their death they were not divided" (229)

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Singer portrays the story of a Jewish man who becomes a slave due to the oppression of the Nazis. His relationship with Wanda is an attempt to escape the psychological trauma of his life. Upon entering the hut, he finds Wanda sleeping and she decides to leave with him to spend the rest of her life together. Wanda's commitment to Jacob is evident as she becomes his true lover. Sarah's journey from Wanda to becoming Jacob's wife and the mother of a Jew raises questions within the Jewish community. The way she assimilates the Jewish culture is apparently evident. Her feigned muteness and gentile background are sources of concern for them. Jacob and Sarah find themselves in a unique situation, advocating for their belonging to the same religion. Through this experience, Jacob learns about his religion, love, and the value of freedom in the world.

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