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THE AMERICAN CRUCIBLE: CONTEXTUALIZING ISRAEL ZANGWILL'S VISION IN *THE MELTING POT* AGAINST THE MILIEU OF 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

GAYATRI BALAKRISHNAN

Independent Scholar, UGC/ NET

Gerugambakkam, Chennai.



ABSTRACT

Ever since the early 17th century, when the *Mayflower* touched the shores of the New World, America has been looked upon as a haven for multicultural ethnicities. The concept attained wide currency with the publication of Israel Zangwill's much celebrated play *The Melting Pot* (1908), lending a powerful metaphor to cultural and political discourse. The feisty spirit of optimism and hope exuded by its central character David Quixano pictures America as the ultimate crucible in which races, cultures and identities melt and transform into the new American identity. Scarred and traumatized by the carnage of the Kishineff pogrom, the Russian Jew David is one among the many castaways who have sought refuge in America. His symphony momentarily titled "The Crucible" eulogizes and celebrates America as a land of ethnic and racial amalgamation – the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God. However, much water has flowed under the bridge since then and quite turbulently so. The post 9/11 era has brought in its wake a gnawing sense of apprehension, uncertainty and large scale amendments to America's immigration policy. The country has witnessed violence and conflict both instigated by and directed against various racial and immigrant groups. And today, we stare at the latest executive order signed by the new administration that imposes a 90 day travel ban on citizens from six countries. This paper attempts to review the country's erstwhile willingness to embrace migrant communities and effect cultural assimilation as depicted in the play, against the context of its current wariness of migrants and refugees.

Keywords: melting pot, crucible, immigrants, assimilation, America

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INTRODUCTION

The term "Melting Pot" describes a model of ethnic relations in which a nation-state's constituent ethnic groups engage in a process of reciprocal fusion. The phrase entered popular parlance with such élan that its origins still remain unknown and obscure to most people. Although one might safely attribute the wide-spread dissemination of the idea to Israel Zangwill, the Anglo-Jewish Zionist-turned-assimilationist, similar references had already been made by writers like J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Frederick Jackson Turner who used the crucible as a persistent metaphor in the building of

America's national identity (Wang 99). But it was Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* (1908) that ingrained the image in public consciousness as the key definition of America, thereby generating far-reaching repercussions as evidenced by the *New York Herald-Tribune* citation which read, "Seldom has an author so molded thought by the instrumentality of a single phrase" (Novick 9).

Often regarded as 'the Dickens of the ghettos', Israel Zangwill is a pre-eminent Anglo-Jewish author and political visionary born of immigrant parents in Whitechapel, London, an East End ghetto inhabited mainly by Jewish migrants and notorious for its squalid poverty (Wang 100). Zangwill's humble origins in the working class milieu helped him empathize with the downtrodden. Prof Lovett states that "the fear and suffering of his early life gave him the great quality of pity" (Schneidermann 125). His profound insight into the ghetto existence, scintillating wit, command of pathos and powerful imagination, aided by a unique and original literary style, broke fresh grounds in the hackneyed portrayal of the Jew. Unlike the stereotypes of the Jewry inspired by Shakespeare's Shylock, Zangwill's sketches, essays and editorials about Jewish immigrants in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* and *Jewish Standard*, replete with freakish humor and depth, provided a three dimensional perspective to the readers. Zangwill contributed an illuminating analysis of the state of Judaism in England, showing up with good humor but at the same time unsparing fullness, the anomalies, the contradictions, and the hypocrisies that had accompanied the adaptation of the Jew to the English environment (Schneidermann 123). His much acclaimed chef d'oeuvre *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), according to Meri-Jane Rochelson "gave readers an inside look into an immigrant community that was nearly as mysterious to more established, middle-class Jews as it was to the non-Jewish population of Britain; at the same time, it provided a compelling analysis of the generation caught between the ghetto and modern British life" (Diniejko). This was followed by many teeming depictions of Jewish ghetto life including *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898), *Ghetto Tragedies* (1899) and *Ghetto Comedies* (1907) among his other works.

As his oeuvre suggests, Zangwill was committed to the Jewish cause politically as well, espousing the Zionist movement inspired by his meeting with its founder Theodor Herzl in 1895. He evolved into one of the leading spirits of the movement that was oriented towards establishing a homeland in Palestine, corresponding to Israel or the mythical Promised Land, for the Jewish diaspora that faced persecution and discrimination especially in Europe. But eventually he quit Zionism and transformed into a territorialist, establishing the Jewish Territorial Organization in 1905 that sought to find a homeland for the Jews in any territory that was feasible. Despite his brief return to Zionism during the Balfour Declaration in 1917, he was quick to identify the peril and impracticality of instituting a Jewish state hemmed in by hostile Arab neighbours. Zangwill thereafter remained a staunch advocate of the concept of cultural assimilation and integration whereby people, including Jews, would cease to be identified solely on grounds of ethnicity but would amalgamate in the hotchpotch of cultures gaining new dimensions and meaning. This concept is brought home in the play *The Melting Pot* which Zangwill wrote as "a Jew who no longer wanted to be a Jew. His real hope was for a world in which the entire lexicon of racial and religious difference is thrown away" ("Israel Zangwill"). The play celebrates the land of America as the quintessential New World, bereft of the prejudices and hostility of the Old World and eulogizes its ability to absorb and grow from the contributions of the immigrants.

Amid the grand and enthusiastic response to the Broadway production of the play, President Theodore Roosevelt leaned over his box, shouting "That's a great play Mr. Zangwill, that's a great play." Zangwill himself claimed that the play was intended "to bring home to America both its comparative rawness and emptiness and its true significance and potentiality for history and civilization" and that it has been "universally acclaimed by Americans as a revelation of Americanism" (Novick 9). *The Melting Pot* sent out a passionate call for the creation of a unique American culture and identity based on the secular ideals of Exceptionalism rather than racial and ethnic considerations. To Zangwill it was the Promised Land where men would live free of barriers and pledge allegiance to one flag and nation regardless of their varied ancestries. According to Ben Wattenberg, "Zangwill had found exactly the right metaphor to translate the urban immigrant experience into American Exceptionalism. If they would but suffer to be melted in the pot, then they would become just as American as anyone else" (Owen).

David's American Crucible: A Realistic Vision or Utopian Ideal?

The Melting Pot has suggestions of a reworking of the cult Romeo-Juliet romance, but Zangwill adds layers of political and historical tension and complexity into the plot. Unlike the trivial grounds of family feud between the houses of Montague and Capulet in Shakespeare's epic love story, here the Jewish and Cossack families are polarized by centuries of Anti-Semitism. David, the young virtuoso violinist and composer hailing from the Jewish Quixano family and Vera, the rebellious and free spirited elite of the Christian Revendal family represent the young generation's attempt to escape the shackles of racial identity and become universal citizens. Their twin journeys – away from their roots and towards assimilation in the new country of America – mark the fulcrum of the drama.

Scarred physically and mentally by the Jewish massacre at his hometown Kishineff, David is the sole survivor of the family while he witnesses the rest of them butchered in the Tsarist pogrom and is forever traumatized by images of "the bleeding body of my mother, the cold, fiendish face of the Russian officer, supervising the slaughter" (Zangwill 149). The Kishineff pogrom was a ruthlessly organized and orchestrated drive to eliminate the Jews under state sponsorship which left around 2000 families homeless and prompted tens of thousands of Russian Jews to migrate to the West. David, "the pogrom orphan" (42), seeks refuge in America in one of the many ships bearing immigrants that touched the shores of Ellis Island and ever since, fiercely and passionately embraces his new homeland that "stretched out her great mother hand" (34) to him. Eager to sever all ties with his traumatic past and with Europe "sodden with blood, red with bestial massacres" (95), he considers America as "the place where God would wipe away tears from off all faces" (34). In a sense, David echoes the belief of the earliest immigrants, the Pilgrim Fathers, who felt, 250 years before the play was written, that the New World was divinely provided for the persecuted. In his telling analysis of *The Melting Pot* Pao-Hsiang Wang cites:

The play was written at a time when Jewish immigration to the US had reached its zenith. Between 1900 and the outbreak of WWI in 1914, an average of one million immigrants entered the US, and between 1880 and 1920, over a million Jews, mostly from East Europe, arrived in New York alone. The Jewish population in New York alone swelled from approximately 60,000 to over 1.5 million by the time of the Great War, rendering New York the greatest Jewish city in the world. Settling in a metropolis where only about fifteen percent of its residents are able to trace their family histories in America to more than one generation, the new immigrants are "passionately optimistic" about the future. Just as the New World was seen as the Promised Land, New York City was regarded as ... "the promised city." (101-102)

David's sentiments and allegiance to his foster land crystallize in the American Symphony he is working on, which is an ode to the country that has fired his romantic imagination and is to be played on the Fourth of July, the day of American Independence. Significantly titled "The Crucible", it celebrates the smoldering and melting of the races and is a prelude to the arrival of the "coming superman" (38) – the American – who will be a fusion of all the races. It is the seething of the Crucible that inspires him as he sees thousands of incoming Jewish children salute the American flag. Zangwill himself speaks through David when he waxes eloquent about his unflinching faith in America and its melting pot as he famously proclaims:

... America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand ... in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like that, brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to — these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians — into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American. (37)

Unlike his nephew, Mendel Quixano is not rhapsodic about assimilating into the American creed. He sees it merely as an asylum like Holland and Turkey and claims that the Jew will only be "tempered and annealed" (101) in these fires. He will be no more American than he was a Dutch or a Turk. But David contends

that America is different: “These countries were not in the making. They were old civilizations stamped with the seal of creed. Here in this new secular Republic we must look forward” (102). And it is this hope that David desperately clings on to like the last straw to stay afloat on sanity, even though his inexorable faith in America may seem too sentimental and unilateral. “The Past I cannot mend — its evil outlines are stamped in immortal rigidity. Take away the hope that I can mend the Future and you make me mad ... I keep faith with America. I have faith America will keep faith with us” (102-103).

But David himself realizes how difficult it is to forego racial consciousness when he is torn between his love for Vera and the disclosure that her father Baron Revendal is the officer who commanded the slaughter of his family in Kishineff. On the professional front, he is caught between his eagerness to perform the American Symphony at the prestigious Carnegie Hall and his debilitating wound from the pogrom which physically incapacitates him to hold the violin for long and psychologically conjures up ghosts from the past. However, *The Melting Pot’s* romantic denouement sees David taking his first major step towards assimilation when he successfully performs to a tasteful audience on American Independence Day and eventually reunites with Vera. The three kisses of peace exchanged by the lovers signify that the evils of the past have been exorcised and they are now part of the crucible. The final glimpse of the two together establishes the possibility of effacing old values and prejudices and emerging new, bound by philanthropy and optimism.

VERA : Look! How beautiful the sunset is after the storm!

DAVID : It is the fires of God round His Crucible [...] Ah, what a stirring and a seething!
Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian, —black and yellow —

VERA : Jew and Gentile —

DAVID : Yes, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross — how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purging flame! Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God (198-199).

Thus, America in Zangwill’s vision truly represents the land of hope where all wounds will be healed and all afflictions cured. Like the ever-lit torch of the Statue of Liberty – the country’s most viable national symbol – indicates, it safeguards liberty, offering enlightenment and freedom from oppression. It is these core values that accord America a special place in the world, a concept popularly termed American Exceptionalism. Coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in the mid-19th century, it is rooted in the conviction that “the country’s vast frontier offers boundless and equal opportunities for individuals to achieve their goals through hard work and self-sacrifice” (Owen). Zangwill’s paeon to the land of the Stars and Stripes is also a clarion call for a humanistic world of equality and integrity.

From the Melting Pot to the Salad Bowl:

More than a century since the play, it can be assumed that the America that Zangwill envisioned is merely a mythopoeic settlement. Although the country sympathized with the victims of persecution and violence, there were doubts regarding the effectiveness of Americanizing them. Even President Roosevelt, who enthusiastically lauded the play, eventually backpedalled in immigration policies. The infamous “hyphenated American” reference by him, seconded later by Woodrow Wilson, was in fact the beginning of the realization that the country would be sent to ruin if it became “a tangle of squabbling nationalities” (“Hyphenated American”). It also entailed the need for immigrant races to submit themselves to the culture and values of the dominant, ‘naturalized’ American to achieve homogeneity. Besides, not all groups were welcomed into the melting pot to transmute and belong, as there was a clear discrimination against people of colour. This evidently went against Zangwill’s proposition and hence, he inserted a caveat in the afterword to the 1914 text of the play: “The process of American amalgamation is not assimilation or simple surrender to the dominant type, as is popularly supposed, but an all-round give-and-take by which the final type may be enriched or impoverished” (Homburger 142). In fact the truth remains that, contrary to Zangwill’s expectation, the Jews remained the most difficult and skeptical group to assimilate due to the fear of losing their culture and religion.

It is here that a pertinent question needs to be asked: Is it imperative to sacrifice one's identity to don the American persona? Scholars and political activists acknowledge that immigrant groups do not, and should not, entirely abandon their distinct identities. Since the 1960s, the concept of the "Melting Pot" has given way to "multiculturalism" and diversity. It is a pluralistic venture whereby racial and ethnic groups maintain many of their basic traits and cultural attributes, while at the same time their orientations change through marriage and interactions with other groups in the society. This has led to the genesis of the new metaphor of the "Salad Bowl" and "American Mosaic" to refer to the present social composition of the country.

Conclusion

An exceedingly diverse and pluralistic society can lead to social fragmentation, competition and distrust. America thus has always been caught in a quandary regarding the issue. Misconceptions and fears concerning Balkanization and the loss of national identity in the wake of the immense influx of European immigrants post the World Wars led to their restriction and barring through administrative enactments. In the event of the 9/11 attacks that sent shock-waves through the entire global community, America has been the focal point of terrorist and sectarian violence.

Although most of the attacks were wreaked by naturalized citizens of America, it has created a sense of paranoia regarding refugees and asylum-seekers. With controversies raging over the latest order to impose travel ban on citizens from selected countries, the administration is hard-pressed to maintain a middle-path.

David's dream of creating a fully integrated ethnic melting pot remains "an idealized vision with its complete realization as elusive as ever" (Wang 123).

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