

Encountering the past in *Enemies:* *A Love Story* by Isaac Bashevis Singer

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The novel *Enemies: A Love Story* by Isaac Bashevis Singer presents the intricacies in the life of a Holocaust refugee. This novel throws light upon the problems in adapting to the new life in American society. Nostalgia is one of the main themes in the novel which the survivors cannot overcome. The question of true religion and the fear created by the barbarity of the Nazi concentration camps appear again and again. The horrors, psychological tremors and entangled relationships constitute the plot. Subsequently, geographical detachment, cultural breakdowns and linguistic divergence are also evident in this narration. All the characters here in one way or the other recount constantly about the past and express their insecurities in the new culture. How to live in the present without the guilt of the past is the main question here.

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Introduction

Memories are an integral part of life experiences. Nostalgia plays an important role in Diasporic culture. Geographical alienation makes the person more dependent on his or her past. Thus Remembrance becomes an innate part of life. Naturally they become homesick for their previous culture. Sometimes this maybe good and sometimes it may become negative. When gazed in terms of Diaspora nostalgia in general is sentimental and disturbing.

The term nostalgia indicates rootlessness or being emotional about the past. In short it is also the feeling of a person who is forced to live in foreign land or is afraid of not returning to his motherland again. Here in this storyline we can see the characters immigrated to America leaving behind their home in Poland, always talking or thinking about their past country. The demarcation dominates the characters to undergo a change in their culture, language etc in order to be relevant. Thus constant reminiscences can be noticed.

Singer's works in major portrays the life in and around the polish village or Shtetl, which is full of Jewishness. But his certain works also deals with the free American society and its amenities, which is contrast to the old East European Jewry. So in this novel readers can witness the narration in comparison with the old Jewish life.

The novel revolves around the four major characters Herman Broder, Masha, Yadwiga Pracz and Tamara. The story travels to Poland, Germany and Russia through Nostalgia but firmly happens in American society. Throughout the novel one can constantly come across the frictions between the past and the present.

According to the critic Edward Alexander "*Enemies* treats the survivors of the Holocaust as if they were now the central bearers of Jewish fate, and as if the definition and resolution of the ultimate questions of Philosophy, politics, and religion can never again be made without reference to their experience". (99) Through this we can understand precisely the impact of the Holocaust on generations of Jews.

The protagonist Herman Broder a Jew from Poland, now a refugee lives in Coney Island with his polish wife Yadwiga. He had lost his family members to Holocaust. Herman is the only member of his family to survive the Nazi regime. He was saved by the slave Yadwiga who was working in his father's household. Herman Broder was detained secretly in the hayloft by Yadwiga for three years. Not even Yadwiga's mother and sister were aware of his hiding. After the war Yadwiga goes to Germany with Herman and spends one year in the camp. After liberation as a token of repaying her generosity Herman marries her in a civil ceremony and they move to USA.

Yadwiga was more of a worker than a companion to Herman because she was from a peasant background who didn't know Yiddish, Jewish laws and culture. She was an innocent village girl who is determined to serve her husband. Even she was willing to convert to Judaism but Herman discouraged it because "it seemed senseless to burden her with a religion that he himself no longer observed". (5)

Yadwiga's over loyalty and goodness bored Herman and he found his true love in Masha who is also a Nazi camp survivor. She was staying along with her Jewish mother Shifrah Puah. Shifrah Puah was a pious lady who still continued to observe the Jewish faith in America. They both lived in an old apartment in Bronx. Masha was married to Leon Tortshiner. But she had been separated from her husband. Herman and Masha were known to each other back in the camp. Masha was keen to divorce her husband so that she can marry Herman. Herman on the other hand had promised that he will divorce Yadwiga, but his conscience didn't allow him to do so. This act was not out of love but of gratitude to the service she has done during the war years. For this he wanted to save this marriage.

Herman had made Yadwiga believe that he works as a book-seller so because of this job he needs to spend many days outside his home. In real he was a ghost writer to the Rabbi Milton Lampert. Rabbi was leading a luxurious life in America. Herman was a non religious person but he was a Talmudic scholar. This helped him to earn his livelihood in the rich country like America. Meanwhile Rabbi was a worldly man who had no luck with Women. Even though the Rabbi was married but still was in search of a true love.

Masha a refugee has adopted the American ways of life for instance dressing sense, partying etc. Masha worked in a cafeteria and she seems to be an atheist, but many a times in the novel we can witness that she is also an ardent believer of the religion. Masha and Herman shared a special physical bond. Every time in order to stay with Masha he leaves Brooklyn and misguides Yadwiga that he needs to be in a different city to sell books.

The personalities of Masha and Yadwiga are dissimilar. One belongs to the Jewish faith the latter belongs to polish but consistently

trying to adopt Jewishness by following the ritual duties and kosher food. For Herman Masha is the present and Yadwiga is the memory of Poland as she still had all the practices of the past land.

Yadwiga is a homemaker and caretaker of Herman. She can neither speak English nor Yiddish. Sometimes Herman replies to her in Yiddish or phrases from Talmud which she can hardly understand. This slightly gives us a hint that she was looked inferior to him and also to his culture. She feared New York's transport and habits. She was a simple human being dependent on everything over Herman. She always longed to have a child by Herman. However Herman avoided it because "In a world in which one's children could be dragged away from their mother and shot, one had no right to have more children" (6-7).

Unlike Yadwiga Herman lived a deceitful life. Both in personal as well as official life. He constantly feared living in America as he was not paying the tax, and in addition he was committing a crime against American law by polygamy. In order to avoid deportation he avoided being with his own community. He never felt sorry for being a ghost writer because he thought "Modern Judaism had one aim: to ape the Gentile". (16)

Although he was not a direct Nazi camp victim but in his head he constantly thought about the Nazis. Even a free country like America didn't lessen his fears. He constantly imagined the invasion of Germans looking for Jews in America. This created an illusion in his mind so he fantasized about the hiding place where he can rescue himself. One more effect of the Holocaust is that he always felt excited at the sight of the food although he had a very small appetite.

Masha on the other hand like Herman is always troubled by the past memories. She is a modern woman with makeup. She can't sleep peacefully at night as the past keeps on engaging in her thoughts. This also occurs to Herman. They never looked relaxed as their minds were constantly engaged. In order to add complications to the existing convoluted life of Herman his first wife Tamara comes to America. Everyone had assumed her to be long dead. But after surviving in the Nazi and the Soviet camps with the guilt of her dead children, finally

she has arrived in America and was staying there with the help of her uncle. In the olden days she was a radical social activist who was engaged in Communism, later in Zionism. The horrible experience of Nazi army made her to turn towards religion. But consistently she was a feminist in the old as well as in the new world.

Marilyn R. Chandler in *Death by the Word: Victims of Language in Enemies: A Love Story* states that:

“The three main women in this novel represent three modes of existence: action, speech, and simple being. Each functions as a catalyst in Herman's tragic odyssey. Through Yadwiga, Herman survives, first by her rescuing him during the war and later in the person of the little daughter he never sees. She gives him life and the continuation of life. Through Tamara, Herman is summoned into a vital dialectic of contemplation and action which, were it a fully realized pairing, would have great productive potential. But through Masha, his Lilith, he is drawn into a world of unreality, succumbing to the seductions of ungrounded intellect and imagination and passion detached from life-giving love, which in the end destroys them”.(116)

This clearly exposes the Vitol role played by each woman in his life.

The rest of the story revolves around how Herman tries to escape from the twist of life. As a man now he had three relations but still he felt very possessive towards his women. For him the assumption that Tamara might had any man in the past made uneasy. When Tamara confirms she had none then he feels relived. Rather than looking into the sufferings she had undergone in the camps he was into this. This indicates his hypocrisy. Instead he was only sorry for his dead children. He was having the guilt for not being a good parent when they were alive. This fear made him not to raise any child.

This novel also criticizes the modern American Jewry. In this novel two parties happen. “Half of his people had been tortured and murdered, and the other half were giving parties” (173). This indicates how people are dumb to the past and the present suffering of their people. Also in America Judaism as become a business. All these consequences have made them to fail miserably to create the

essence of the European Jewry.

For instance the Rabbi Lampert is more like a businessman. He exploited spirituality for his necessity. He fails to continue the original legacy of the religion in America. In the second example the neighbours (as they were living in Jewish neighbourhood) of Herman wanted to teach Yadwiga about the Jewish laws. Ironically they convince her that in order to practice the religion one needs to have the life insurance and up to date electrical appliances. Thus suggests the materialistic approach towards the religion.

In contrast to Lampert, Tamara's uncle Reb Abraham Nissen and his wife still followed the religion with same faith. All the Jewish characters in this novel have suffered Holocaust at various degrees. Memories were the constant haunting demons for them. "Other refugees used to say that with time one forgets, but neither Shifrah Puah nor Masha would ever forget. On the contrary, the further removed they were from the holocaust, the closer it seemed to become" (35). As a result everyone constantly clings to the past.

Individually each character suffers this in different mode. In the case of Shifrah Puah, she wears black attire as the remembrance of it. Masha and Herman in their dreams were constantly chased by the Germans. For Tamara a bullet which has got struck on her hip during the war years was the link to her past. "Is (bullet) my best souvenir. It reminds me that I once had a home, parents, children. If they take it away from me, I won't have anything left at all" (154).

As Singer in his real life followed Vegetarianism, in his many works he tries to propagate the same. Even *Enemies: A Love Story* communicates it. In this plot vegetarianism won't get much space but one can see it in a corner. Herman tries to lecture both Masha as well as Yadwiga to not to cook meat but Masha replies that 'but without meat there's nothing to cook. God himself eats meat- human flesh. There are no vegetarians- none. If you had seen what I have seen, you would know that God approves of slaughter' (27). This specifies she doesn't want to go against the food cycle of this universe.

This story is also about the identity they frame apart from the religion. As Lawrence S. Friedman hypothesizes "Singer's Holocaust

survivors can never forget. Eyewitnesses to the slaughter of their people, Tamara, Masha, and Shifrah Puah are compulsive retellers of their stories. What identity they possess derives from their role as survivors” (152).

Belief and doubt is also a concern in this book. Many a times because of the tragic Holocaust they doubt about the existence of God, but on the other hand they try to embrace him. In order to experience the true Jewry in Israel Tamara’s uncle leaves her the bookshop and home in America. At the same time Herman breaks up with Masha. According to the advice of Tamara he looks after the bookshop for a while. During that time Tamara fears to leave the bookshop unlocked because “some Yiddish author might break in at night and put in some more books” (211). Singer in this novel also tries to uphold the dignity and timelessness of the religious text in distinction to the secular literature.

At last Masha commits suicide. Herman disappears breaking all the bonds of the life. Yadwiga gives birth to his child. Both Tamara and Yadwiga look after the baby. According to the suggestion of the Rabbi Lampert the baby was named after Herman’s dead girlfriend Masha. Gradually Tamara owns the bookstore and she looks after it. On the other hand Yadwiga takes care of the household. Finally in this novel only Tamara and Yadwiga live together and everyone are left apart.

In the article *Singer's Diasporan Novel: Enemies: A Love Story* Dorothy S. Bilik mentions that:

“The fictional existence of Herman's child is recognition of the potential for new life in America for even these tortured survivors. Continuity and the promise of future generations are not found in Singer's novels set in Europe. Without doubt Singer's European Jewish world is more fully realized and vivid than the contemporary milieu depicted in *Enemies*. However, Singer's conscious commemorations of the vanished past, despite their vigor and color, are tempered by the elegiac. For all its bitterness, for all its presentation of the anomie and vulgarity of Jewish American life, *Enemies* somberly acknowledges the possibilities for renewal

inherent in the American immigrant experience.”(99-100)

The plot disseminates that with all the chaos of life still one can have the hope for better days.

Conclusion

In the preface Singer informs the readers that “The characters are not only Nazi victims but victims of their own personalities and fates”. This stipulates that even before the World War II they were suffering from their own fears and illusions. After war their personalities saw a great change by accumulating the trauma to the already existing horrors. If these characters were continued to stay in their native even after the Holocaust the scenario would have been different. The degree of suffering might have lessened. The majority survivors didn’t get this luck; rather they immigrated to different countries. One such country opted by the refugees is America. They landed on America with a hope to restart their life peacefully. But the survival gave them many challenges. This created many more traumas in their lives. Like the phrase “To be or not to be: that is the question” for the Jewish characters it is to carry their Jewishness in the alien society. Isaac Bashevis Singer through this distinctive story magnificently talks of the Diaspora, Nostalgia and the basic human nature towards love.

Thus the readers are manipulated symbolically that even though the race has consumed the cancer by the wars, still they keep back their faiths in different ways. They are trying to preserve modern Jewry through the fragmented history. By having the past memories constantly in their heart one is looking forward to the present with a hope. Thus this is a story of the past as well as of the future history of the American Jews.

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