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## ELUSIVENESS OF JEWISH IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN TEXTUALITY

*Zuzana Buráková*

THERE is no doubt that the body of American Jewish literature is recognized as a distinctive part of American literary history. The development of American Jewish literature has been the concern of manifold academic studies concentrating mainly on the historical forces that defined the lives of Jewish immigrants to America, the acceptance or refusal of Jewish religious and cultural heritage, and the universality of specific Jewish themes in literary writings. The result of this development is a vast collection of literature reflecting the existence of a particular minority with the imprint of its own voice in the mosaic of multicultural America.

In an attempt to define Jewish American literature, it has been assumed that there are no clear boundaries that could capture the substance of this literature. For Irving Howe, Jewish American literature represented texts which drew on immigrant experience; however such a definition has become rather limiting in the last three decades. Other literary critics postulate specific criteria for inclusion measuring Jewishness by categories such as “blood” (is the author the child of a Jewish mother?), “language” (is the text written in Hebrew or Yiddish?), “religiosity” (does the author or the character live according to the Jewish law?) and “theme” (does the text reflect, for example, the legacy of the Holocaust?) (Wirth-Nescher and Kramer 2003, 269–70). However, none of the given criteria is capable of delineating the growing body of Jewish American literature as well as the range of various themes it addresses. The inability to clearly define Jewish American literature is due to the fact that the identity of American Jews is rather elusive therefore finding particular common boundaries is more than challenging. Nevertheless, Grauer suggests that definitions of Jewish American literature are clearly inextricably entwined with the terms by which we understand Jewish American identity (2003, 270).

Grauer's assertion is based on the concerns which the readers may have about the nature and meaning of identity, which are reflected explicitly in the literature itself. She explains that our critical questions are often the writers' questions as well: what do we mean by Jewish American identity, anyway? And why should it matter (2003, 270)? The question of identity is not confined only to Jewish American literature. In the postmodern period of shifting borders, transnationalism and multiculturalism, it is eminent that the traditional representations of identity have been changed and replaced. Without regard to this fact, Jewish American literature is particularly concerned with the identity issue and such evidence is inevitably present in the literary texts of the last two decades. Grauer confirms that the rich array of literary texts that has emerged over the past twenty-five years should be examined less for its coherence as a body of literature defined *by* an identity as for its focus *on* it. This shift in focus can be seen as a part of a larger cultural climate in which discussions of identity are proliferating (2003, 270.). Apparently Grauer is not the only scholar suggesting to search for the answers as to what identity is in the textuality. Kugelmass also claims that to this day Jewish textuality – whether religious or secular in orientation – constitutes a collective meditation for a changing and strikingly amorphous entity that focuses on the questions “Who we are and why?” (2003, 5). He states that such queries are uniquely poignant for a group that retains a national consciousness while existing as a diasporic people with considerable historical depth (2003, 5).

### Home as a Rhetorical Territory

*What does every Jew have in common, whether he hails from Riga or from Aden, from Berlin or from Marrakesh or Glasgow?*

*A sense of unease in society. Nowhere do almost all Jews feel entirely at home.*

–Isaia Berlin in: Tarsch and Wolfson 1986, 15

The first predicament central to the determination of the Jewish identity is the question of autochthony; how do Jews identify themselves if their biological place of origin is constructed? In all phases, a deep symbolical (and at times organizational) relation to the “homeland” –be it an independent nation-state or

set in a quasimythological distant past—is maintained by a reference to constructs of a common language, history, culture and—central to many cases—to religion (Kokot et al. 2004, 3). Such a deep symbolical relation to homeland is typical for Jews. Historically, the sacred homeland to which Jews long to return is Israel. The theme of home forms the relationship between home and Jewish identity. Grauer asserts that “exile” in religious terms, marks a radical disruption in the relationship between God and the Jews as a people, the dispersion of the Jews outside of the land of Israel—the physical loss of their original home—has come to signify a metaphysical lack for the collective entity as well (Grauer 2003, 277). Furthermore, she claims that the sense of displacement that comes with the distance from the homeland of memory is then equated with the Jewishness itself, where the Jewish identity is defined as the condition of wandering, alienation, and perpetual deferral of identification with place (2003, 277). However, not all Jews are able to see Israel as their homeland; therefore the identification with a place in the Jewish context is difficult to define. Even though sociologists distinguish between the physical and non-physical home, Jews are archetypical as one of the first dispersed communities. The definition of home according to *The Oxford English Dictionary* sees home as “a place, region or state to which one properly belongs, on which one’s affections centre, or where one finds refuge, rest or satisfaction.” However, according to Descombe, we also define home as a virtual space—a rhetorical country. When posing the question “Where is (someone) at home?”, the answer bears less on a geographical than a rhetorical territory. The (person or) character is at home when he is at ease in the rhetoric of the people with whom he shares life. The sign of being at home is the ability to make oneself understood without too much difficulty, and to follow the reasoning of others, without any need for long explanations (Descombes 1995, 108).

Descombes’ definition is applicable to any immigrant minority living in a host country. However, can it be applied to Jews? It is asserted that a more embracing term in Diaspora. Living in Diaspora, Jewish Americans construct their ethno-religious identity out of the myths of imagined homelands, connections to ancient ancestors, and through the lens of the Holocaust. The concept of “home,” both in terms of homeland

and in terms of the physical homes that people live in, provides the framing notion (Hart 2008). The concept of Diaspora originally applied to Jews, because they constituted on the first dispersed communities, if not the first one. Moreover, the Jewish Diaspora remains the archetypical one in several aspects, as Safran postulates:

1. The absence of a physical homeland for nearly two millennia, and the widespread doubts within the international community in general, and its intellectual elite in particular, whether such a homeland should exist at all.
2. The lack of full acceptance of Jews by their host societies, even in some Western countries where they have achieved formal political and civic equality.
3. The transfer of “diasporic” features on the population of the restored homeland: its international pariah status, its global loneliness, and a growing collective paranoia associated with the feeling that “our national existence is threatened by enemies who surround us, just as in Diaspora, Jews were in most cases threatened with expulsion or annihilation in the face of the general indifference of others.”
4. The fact that Diaspora seemed to be considered a “normal” aspect of the Jewish condition, so that it has become part of European Christian folklore.

(in: Kokot et al. 2004, 10)

Diasporas comprise special kinds of immigrants because they have retained a memory of, a cultural connection with, and a general orientation toward, their homelands; they have institutions reflecting something of a homeland culture and/or religions; they relate in some (symbolic or practical) way to their homelands; they harbor doubts about their full acceptance by the hostland; they are committed to their survival as a distinct community; and many of them have retained a myth of return (Safran 1991; Chaliand and Rageau 1995; Cohen 1997 in: Kokot et al. 2004, 10). Processes of identity formation never occur outside the socio-political and cultural contexts. They are no mere reflection of a free play of independent actors – they always require an opposite, the “other” on to which the image of the “self” is projected (Kokot et al. 2004, 7). As Avtar Brah as-

serts, there is not one homogeneous model of identity that equally serves for all members of a group (Kokot et al. 2004, 7).

The relationship between the “original” homeland and identity has also been rather elusive in the narrative of Jewish American literature. Wirth-Nesher demonstrates this complicated relationship between the place and the identity in two diverging trajectories: the first represented by authors of Ashkenazi (or European) descent; the second by those of Sephardi origin. She claims that such categories do not name clearly demarcated identities; however, they often relate more to self-definition than to a clear line of ancestry, and are used to differentiate the narrative that might in other ways overlap. (Wirth-Nescher and Kramer 2003, 277). Furthermore, she asserts that the metaphor of exile has been replaced by images that emphatically declare America as the “homeland” of Jewish American fiction, and the native land that is also the emotional centre (2003, 277). According to her, Israel depicted in literature is not the site to which American Jews must return, but rather the site of pilgrimage, a stop on the itinerary of self-discovery that ultimately leads home to America (2003, 277). The circular nature of such traveling posits two points of spatial identification rather than one, and allows American Jews in Israel to imagine alternative identities – to construct “a counterlife that is one’s own anti-myth” as Philip Roth puts it, without having to abandon the security of their American home (2003, 277). A similar tendency can be observed in the writings of American authors of Sephardic descent; however, their itineraries are radically different and their sense of homelessness more profound. While Ashkenazi Jews move metaphorically between America, Israel and East Europe, Sephardic Jews long to return to Egypt (2003, 277).

To conclude, Safran believes that members of Diaspora may or may not have adjusted to life in the hostland but they have a spiritual, emotional, and/or cultural home that is outside the hostland. Whether that home is necessarily the “original” homeland is a matter of controversy (in: Kokot et al. 2003, 13). The theme of home or homecoming can be witnessed in contemporary American Jewish literature where characters linger between America as their native home and East Europe as their metaphorical place of origin.

## Language – An Internal Bilingualism

*Take an old Jewish book – take the Bible, the most famous of all books – and you will see that one language has never been enough for the Jewish people.*

– Shmuel Niger 1990, 11

Language as the very centre of a group differentiation is another determinant of identity. According to Alter, there are three basic approaches in defining the American Jewish culture. Minimalists look first to the language. Anything not written in a Jewish language like Hebrew or Yiddish is to their mind automatically excluded as not truly Jewish. Maximalists, by contrast, include under “American Jewish” anything created by an American of Jewish extraction, whether it has a Jewish theme or not. In between are those who search for certain defining commonalities in American Jewish culture. American Jewish culture to them involves Jewish ideals, the universal application of Jewish experiences, and the employment of what may be seen as a distinctive American Jewish style, shaped by immigration, urbanization, Yiddish culture, and rapid social mobility (Alter 1986, 268). It is asserted that the first of Alter’s distinction is hardly applicable in contemporary America since most of the Jewish American literary texts are written in English. However, the traditional linguistic representation of Jews used to be bilingual; Yiddish as the language of daily existence and Hebrew as the sanctified language of the Sabbath (Shechner 1990, 38). The Ashkenazim of Eastern Europe dwelled in two worlds simultaneously. One was the world of labor and trade, money, politics, love, marriage, family, trouble, death. Its domain were the six days from Saturday night through Friday, and its language was commonly Yiddish, though the Jews also spoke Polish, Russian, Czech, Hungarian, German, Ukrainian, and to some degree had their imaginations shaped by those who languages as well. The other was the world of the Sabbath, the world of prayer and study, Torah and Talmud, faith and prophecy. It was exalted and transcendent, and it had its own language, Hebrew (Shechner 1990, 47). Yiddish scholar March Weinreich called this opposition an “internal bilingualism,” meaning that in the mind of every Jew the two languages stood for distinct and opposed realms of experience (Shechner 1990, 47). Having two or

more linguistic representations only emphasizes the fact, that Jews have always had an opportunity to relate to more than one identity. Shechner states that Yiddish was the language of secular experience, the token of exile, while Hebrew the language of both the Biblical past and the redemptive future. However, once the Jewish history was redeemed, the languages of the exile had to be given up (1990, 39).

Yiddish, a language that the majority of Ashenazi Jews used to speak, is now spoken very randomly. Yiddish has been replaced by New English that only Jewish people can understand (Shechner 1990, 39). This can be well demonstrated by an introductory anecdote to Katz's book called *Jewish as a Second language* (1991) which is written for non-Jews wanting to marry into Jewish families: "I am Jewish. My husband Bill is not. One day my mother had to get her blood pressure checked. She didn't need a ride, she said: she'd call a cab. Bill said, 'Okay.' Of course she stopped speaking to us" (Kugelmass 2003, 10).

As Kugelmass comments, non-Jews cannot learn Yiddish and they should not even try. Instead they ought to learn the true language of the Jews, which is according to Katz, not Yiddish, but the complex twists and somersaults of everyday behavior (2003, 10). Katz points out that even though the traditional language representation is no longer dominant, there are still present certain linguistic nuances which reflect not so much the use of language itself but the way of thinking specific to people of Jewish origin. Wirsh-Nescher believes that despite impressive bodies of literature in both of these languages in America, the language of American Jewish has become English, so much so that Cynthia Ozick has at one time suggested that English be referred to as the New Yiddish (Wirth-Nesher et al. 2003, 111).

## Conclusion

The contemporary American Jewish identity is defined more in the terms of a cultural representation than those related to the traditional identifications. David Hollinger argues that in the kind of post-ethnic world that characterizes America, the notion of affiliation (i.e. a community of consent in which one chooses one or more of many possible selves) replaces the concept of



identity as something fixed and given (Hollinger 1995, 7). In order to find answers to the questions on how the previous traditional representations have been replaced, it is necessary to look into the Jewish textuality. Kugelmass claims that to this day the Jewish textuality – whether religious or secular in orientation – constitutes a collective meditation for a changing and strikingly amorphous entity that focuses on the questions “Who we are and why?” (Kugelmass 2003, 5). He states that such queries are uniquely poignant for a group that retains a national consciousness while existing as a diasporic people with considerable historical depth (2003, 5). The output of the paper aims to support Kugelmass’ argument that some answers to the present state of identity can be found in textuality of contemporary American Jewish writers whose main themes are the replacement of traditional representations of identity such as home and language by more postmodern and abstract rhetorical territory and internal bilingualism.

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#### ABSTRACT

Due to historical, sociological and economical changes, the identity of American Jews has been undergoing an intensive transformation. The growing body of American Jewish literature reveals that the quest for perceiving the concept of Jewishness in America has not yet been accomplished. The paper draws on the theoretical assumptions of Tresa Grauer and Jack Kugelmass, who state that some of the answers to the question of identity in contemporary America can be found in textuality. The paper concentrates on the two most crucial determinants of identity which are "home and "language," and on their gradual transformation to more abstract concepts such as "rhetorical territory" and "internal bilingualism."

#### AUTHOR

*Zuzana Buráková* is an assistant professor at the University of Pavol Jozef Šafárik in Košice, Slovakia. She teaches the History of American Literature, American Ethnic Literatures and Literary Theory at the Department of British and American Studies. She co-authored two monographs; in 2010 "Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British literature" and in 2013 "Gender in Literature." Her research interests include Jewish American Literature and Trauma Studies.