
A SHORT EXPEDITION FROM EERINESS TO SOLEMNITY

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Abstract

This paper elucidates plainly the condition of American theatre where the literature exists with the support of Jewish works in America. It shows the indispensable nature of American literature without Jews. It also paves way to understand the existence of Jews using their tragic-comical temperament. The humorous condition of Jews makes them exist in America. They ridicule themselves and it helped them for their existence. It also talks about one of the Jews, Emma Lazarus and her existence in America. Jews can be proud because of the Jewish American poet, Emma Lazarus born into a Sephardic family, whose poetic lines have been carved on a bronze plaque in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty which was placed in 1903. A speedy enrichment is noted about the Jewish American culture over the past twenty years. Humour helps Jewish people to endure their dreadful subsistence. Jews subjugated their complicated circumstances with the approach of their hilarious temperament.

Keywords: Jewish humour, tragic-comedy, Jewish culture

The emergence of the Jewish comic tradition whose origin was in American theatres in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century had its derivation with some of the contemporary American playwrights like Wendy Wasserstein, Neil Simon, Barbara Lebow, and Herb Gardner. The Jewish comic tradition widened with the involvement of Jewish comedians like Milton Berle, George Burns, Fanny Brice, Jack Benny and Sophie Tucker in the early twentieth century. This contribution of the comedians paved as a linkage between Yiddish theatre and American theatre. It was said that the halls which were filled with vaudeville and burlesque that was previously owned by Jews, now wanted more of American than of Yiddish nature with the flavour of Jews. This was the period during which we can glimpse the influence of a variety of cultural and historical developments during the twentieth century.

Thrive of the Jewish American entertainers can be seen with the cultural idiosyncrasies which has humours in it (the first Jewish American entertainers on

discovering humour in ethnic idiosyncrasies of their characters). During the progression of depiction of unconventionality, many audience were enthralled in the web of hilarious circumstances. They unabashedly vanquished their cultural background. It is alleged that the characters portrayed in the stereotypical order, like *Yiddische mama* and *schlemiel*, who is called a *maladroit* and estranged hard-luck loser (Epstein 2001: xv) –which are expressed as vaudeville (a style of multi-act theatrical entertainment which flourished in North America from the 1880s through the 1920s) where they persistently explicit fundamental political interpretation. These characters portrayed their intimate knowledge of Jewish sensibility, instead of presenting their eccentric fondness towards racial humour. Sarah Cohen opines that the Jewish vaudevillians experienced their acts with fiery Yiddish to amuse, not to condemn their own people bereft of considering their Jewish nature.

Jewish accessibility is intertwined with Jewish humour and has been dealt with, by many critics as well as artists. David Krasner, editor of the book, *Twentieth –Century American Drama*, transmits the message that critic and artists have equipped the relationship of Jewish susceptibility, where it is entangled with Jewish humour. Sigmund Freud opined “Jewish jokes are stories which are created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics... I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character” (qtd. in Curry 1996: 199) (457). Jews have the nature of deprecating themselves. This study of Jewish American comedy was titled *The Haunted Smile: The story of Jewish Comedians in America*. It is said that Jewish comedy is infused with self-condemnation. Jews ventured to conquer anxiety and alienation by criticizing themselves and they tried to surpass panic and embarrassment.

Humour helps Jewish people to endure their dreadful existence. Jews conquered their complicated circumstances with the approach of their humorous nature. It is also instituted that they scrutinize the import of humour and comic temperament which materialized from the Jewish history. The sensation of triumphing over the tragic circumstances and the inevitability for patience and the yearning in order to rejoice life under awful circumstances which emerge from the Jewish history of inexorable discrimination and pogroms perishing in the Holocaust tragedy.

It is alleged that the Jews had been under the control of many others, both in Israel and in exile in Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia. They had to undergo an age of quasi-autonomy, tolerance etc. They also have experienced dearth and viciousness. They were not provided any significance among the resident people in America and they were staunchly, culturally, racially, and also politically divergent. They sensed that America was different for them. There is prominent authentication that the twentieth century would have been imperfect devoid of these Jewish writers. It is also demonstrated that among the seven Nobel American Laureates, like Saul Bellow, and Isaac Bashevis Singer at the close of Second World War, has bagged prizes. Jewish

writers also have bagged other prizes like Pulitzer prizes, National Book Awards, P.E.N /Faulkner Awards over the last century. Jewish blooming to the topmost altitude in all the categories should be appreciated, like from trouble to triumph, cultural deprivation to cultural flourish, and slavery to salvation. Jewish creativity did not instigate from the land of America. In America, Jews from sundry places, times and backgrounds were equipped with assortment of chances and challenges and literary retort were diverse.

Humour reigned in the Jewish culture for its endurance. The inevitability of humour was smelt by the Jewish writers relieving itself from the pain of tragedy in the history of Jews. Arthur Miller considers about the tragedy in this relation to Jewish history: "there is tragedy in the world but...the world must continue: one is condition for the other. Jews can't afford to revel too much in the tragic because it might overwhelm them"(qtd. In Cohen 1983: (124) (458) Jewish comedy suggests its meticulous philosophy that categorizes the abundance of tragedy in life but renounces to inhabit on it. Instead it heightens the significance of familial acquaintance, communal support and spiritual reliance. It is also noted that Russian drama has its vital role on Yiddish Theatre. Neil Simon and Wendy Wasserstein converse of the tragic-comedy and about uncertainty in life which communicates to their dramatic efforts. Wasserstein to some extent suggests to the Chekhovian observation of the comic, refers to her plays as regretful comedies.

It is believed that Simon's comedies afford hasty exonerate for the seriousness. Bigsby expresses his opinion that Simon has implemented the use of a procedure of averting soreness all the way through hilarity. Also Simon's shrewdness of playwriting technique, his theatrical dialogue in all of his subsequent plays states its effective one-liners that his characters marvellously. Simon thrust himself into Jewish American entertainment entrenched in ethnic humour (religious) in understanding the curative power of comedy. The nature of self condemn of Jewish humour can be proposed as escapism and defense mechanism from the sensation of cultural haziness. They were in fact in exploring self distinctiveness in the midst of guilt feelings in other country. To mention some Jewish writers in America were Emma Lazarus, Saul Bellow, and Isaac Bashevis Singer et.al

Talking about Emma Lazarus, who was an American poet, born into a Sephardic Ashkenazi Jewish family, had been in America from the time of colonial period. Jews can really sense ostentatious for her lines of sonnet, *The New Colossus* being engraved on a bronze plaque in the plinth of the Statue of Liberty which was placed in 1903. From that her time, gradually, it was possible to glimpse the augmentation of Jewish people in America. The development of Emma was that her maternal great grandfather encouraged the revolution there and her cousin, Benjamin Cardozo, was the Supreme Court judge. Progressively, America instigated making out the capability and also the works of Jews. Emma was brought up there in a well to do comportment because of her father; an affluent sugar trader supported her in getting skilled in

various languages like German, French, and Italian. *Poems and translations: written Between the Age Fourteen and Sixteen*, Emma's first book of poetry was published by her father in the 1866. This was delivered by Hugo, Dumas, Schiller and Heine. Her famous sonnet, *The New Colossus* was inscribed in 1883. She exposed aptitude very early in her life for poetry, has seized the attention of Ralph Waldo Emerson towards her with her first book. Her book of poetry, *Admetus* and other poems, a novel named, *Alide: An Episode in Goethe's Life*, published in 1871, was dedicated to him which established the forthcoming of Jews. She did not assume herself as a Jew and work but she utterly wanted to be as an American writer, where she has quoted, "Give me your tired, your poor, /Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free... I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" (26), which was emblazoned on Statue of Liberty.

Lazarus later on published poetry and also Prose in renowned journals during her period, *Lippincott's Scribner's and Century*. Subsequently, she initiated writing about the subjects of Jews. Many immigrants expressed that the Jews have brought their culture and languages into the land of America with them through their writings. The Jewish American literature field is considered as open-ended which is not curbed to one relatively short, well –defined era, where it prolonged over two centuries, still prolongs to extend in engrossing and significant technique. It should be in an intention of learning the background of Jews thematically, generically, linguistically, and historically.

Simon who is measured as an astounding comedian in television has shown a concoction of exceptional physical power and emotional overabundance. He tries to defend the welfare and radiating admiration for their talent. Wendy Wasserstein points out the pain and laughter, disenchantment and sanguinity persistently interrupts the audience's emotional contribution through the play's episodic structure and refuses to provide them with any all encompassing solutions. As a writer, Wasserstein too understands the Jewish effect on her receptiveness. She also divulges out own self-deprecating comic personality on the way of self exploration. Merv also ridiculously indicated that Jewish mothers persuade their naive women to assume that Jewish men are superior husbands. Gardiner, is a socially-aware comedian entered the world of Jewish comedy in 1950s, discriminates himself from Wasserstein and Simon is the menacing satire on social and political institutions that pervades the stuff of his writing.

A rapid enhancement is noted about the Jewish American culture over the past twenty years. Also Jewish comedy which is entrenched in its ethnic humour tradition transmits a message that it conveys the philosophy that it is hard to survive with tragedy despite the fact that there is seen a surfeit of tragedy. Both Wendy Wasserstein and Neil Simon enunciate that of tragicomic ambiguity in life as it recounts to their dramatic works. Wasserstein indirectly refers to the Chekhovian surveillance of the comic, consign to her plays as melancholic comedies. Wasserstein explains about the Chekhovian, the Russian writer's work that there is neither severity nor comedy in his

work. It can be measured as both. She elucidates that there is a swindle which prevails in writing, reading, and playing and we might find a balance between the humour and tragedy in his work. (Wasserstein 1993:x)(458). Wasserstein also finds that there survives a synthesis of tears and mirth, harmony and misery, sanguinity and self-doubt." I can't think of a humorous situation that does not involve pain, "Simon maintains in relation to his comedies (qtd. In Cohen)(458, a companion to twentieth –century American Drama). This vision of life is more worldwide than pure racial or narrow-minded which describes the wide-ranging recognition and entreaty of existing Jewish comedy to mainstream American audience. In reality, during the past some decades, they found to be budding as the tenor of contemporary American Jewry and they express concerns as a movement against a modern from their cultural environment which are effectively associated their anxiety-ridden tragic-cum-comic observation of life in the observation of normal American viewer, attaining acknowledgment and frequent success commercially.

Neil Simon, the only playwright who is perhaps most triumphant amidst the contemporary comic Jewish playwright was commented by a literary analyst and novelist Arthur Miller during the year 1991, "dismay at the decline of a Broadway, which at that time...was staging only one play with any serious pretensions, and that was a Neil Simon comedy" (2000:114)(459). In addition, Bigsby defies that Simon has become conventional Broadway writer, highly skilful, and creating plays which probes consternation in such a way as to cauterize the abrasion which he briefly opens (2000:160). Further, it is freckled that there subsists a catastrophic circumstance in Simon's comedy plays but the pain never ceases long and the tragedy persistently foils which is found to be the nature of Jewish comedy, whose function is not to discover prejudice or injustice and tragedy but fairly to exult life in the face of its for the most part miserable circumstances. We acquire an instantaneous discharge from the tragic situations thus downplaying severity of his characters' plight. This procedure of ward off ache through humour accounts for Simon's plea and the significant doubt that he inspires. (2000: 159).

Playwrights like Simon gets inspiration from own life as well as others' factual life. Themes touched by Neil Simon are not only social, political and many issues similar to family issues, but also old age fear, divorce, sibling rivalry, misunderstanding among the family members, and love etc. Neil Simon easily changes the situations light by the technique of comedy. To conclude, Jewish contributions have made the literature rich in America. The Jews in order for the survival, commenced to write comically but that ended in seriousness.

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