



MINISTERUL EDUCAȚIEI
ROMÂNIA
UNIVERSITATEA DE MEDICINĂ,
FARMACIE, ȘTIINȚE ȘI TEHNOLOGIE
„GEORGE EMIL PALADE”
DIN TÂRGU MUREȘ



FACULTATEA DE ȘTIINȚE ȘI LITERE
„PETRU MAIOR”



Acta Marisiensis. Philologia
Volume 4 (2022), Issue 1
p-ISSN: 2668-9537, e-ISSN: 2668-9596

10.2478/amph-2022-0065

ANZIA YEZIERSKA AND THE IDENTITY CRISIS IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

*Smaranda Ștefanovici*¹

¹Assoc. Prof., PhD, 'G.E. Palade' University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of Târgu Mureș, Târgu Mureș, Mureș county, 540 142, Romania

Abstract: *Religious and racial identities are being reconceived as responses to cultural environments. Many Jews continue to hold conflicting ideas about their identity. We will trace the realities and challenges of being Jewish in the USA through Anzia Yeziarska's "The Lost Beautifulness." The short story demonstrates the failure of Americanization and the need for a hybrid identity for Jewish-American immigrants to solve their identity crisis in the American context. The main character uses the white paint for the kitchen as a symbolic path towards assimilating American concepts of whiteness, cleanliness, and beauty, apparently making her equal to and accepted by the American mainstream middle and upper-class population.*

Keywords: *whiteness, Americanization, assimilation, identity crisis, hybrid identity*

MOTTO: “As one of the dumb, voiceless ones, I speak. One of the millions of immigrants beating, beating out their hearts at your gates for a breath of understanding. Ach! America! From the other end of the earth from where I came, America was a land of living hope, woven of dreams, aflame with longing and desire.”

(A.Yeziarska, “America and I,” 1923)

Introduction

Rottenberg's study on *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature* (2008) adapts, according to Nerad in “Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature” (2009) “Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to analyze four categories of identity - race, class, gender, and ethnicity - to link them to the concept of Americanness” (Nerad 2). Rottenberg refers to two minority groups, the African Americans and the Jewish Americans. Anzia Yeziarska's novel *Arrogant Beggar* (1927) is one of the six case studies. In Nerad's assumption, comparing the two minority groups better shows “how dominant norms produce and sustain social stratification in the US.” (Nerad 3).

Rottenberg uses literature to illustrate her case, contributing to identity studies. Following Butler, she argues that identity is affected by the subject's "reiterative performance of dominant norms" and by the subject's identification and desire to live up to the norms associated with the mainstream. (Nerad 207)

Unlike the white/black racial dichotomy, the Jewish nonblack ethnics identify as white by performing "the traits enveloped within whiteness"; hence, the idea of identity as culturally constructed due to "the power of dominant norms to shape individual identity." (Nerad 208).

Whoever applies these norms can have a chance to live a "nonmarginal" life, as Nerad contends as a conclusion to the interpretation of Rottenberg's text.

In a previous article, "Begging to Differ: Nella Larsen's Quicksand and Anzia Yeziarska's Arrogant Beggar" (2007), the same Rottenberg mentions Lori Harrison-Kahan, who proposes that Adele from *The Arrogant Beggar* (1927), "like Yeziarska's other heroines, is represented as a hybrid character, caught between "white aspirations and ethnic loyalties" who is not fully assimilated at the end (Rottenberg 88).

Yeziarska identified Jewishness as compatible with both whiteness and "Americanness." She did not need to negotiate her white American identity, equal to the President, as she used to say, so she applied the norms of whiteness in an optimistic and naïve way, believing in racial equality and upward social mobility. The aspiration of a Jewish American woman to be assimilated into white America proves to be a myth that ends in an identity crisis. She would have to realize the importance of a hybrid identity to survive and adapt to the American context to solve the identity crisis.

Anzia Yeziarska belongs to the group of writers born in the Old World and influenced by Yiddish and European literature. In their writings, this group of writers describes the life of immigrants in a new society. It is important to mention that most of their stories reflected many of their own experiences as immigrants, as Steven J. Rubin points out: "Autobiography, [...] offered a means of defining an uncertain identity within a new and often alien culture. More importantly, it provided a vehicle for linking personal history with the group's – with an entire social process. In recreating the inherent truths of their lives, writers such as Antin and Yeziarska recreated the collective truths of their people." (Ruben 287)

Anzia Yeziarska was a Jewish American novelist who immigrated in the early 1890s from Russian Poland to the USA to fulfill the American Dream. In "America and I," Yeziarska notes that she is one of the millions of people who went to America full of optimism, of "living hope, woven of dreams, aflame with longing and desire." She describes her struggles to adapt to living in America. Her own experiences as an immigrant to America inspired her writings. She wrote about the struggles of female Jewish immigrants in New York's Lower East Side and the cost of acculturation and assimilation among Jewish immigrants. She examines these processes of assimilation and acculturation, recording the tensions caused by immigrants' desire to be part of both The Old World and the New World. Eastern European women immigrants struggled as an ultimate solution to integration to find a place for themselves within their traditional Jewish culture (enculturation) and within American society (acculturation).

Yeziarska firmly believed that she had something to offer to America, the country that adopted her, and that her voice needed to be heard. She used literature as an instrument of social change. She attempted to explain the immigrant culture to American-born readers and broaden the American Dream's boundaries to include the immigrants, the impoverished, and the women. She believed in equality between the white, middle, and upper-classes and the non-white low-class immigrants.

Soon the American Dream became an impossible hope. The tone of her writings changed from hopeful and anxious to angry and resentful.

"The Lost Beautifulness" is a short story that appeared in *Hungry Hearts* (1920), a short story collection. Hanneh Hayyeh is a naïve Jewish immigrant who lives with Jake, her husband,

in a rented apartment in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York. She works as a servant and laundress for Mrs. Preston. While waiting for her son, Aby, who is enrolled in the American army, she does everything she can to fulfill her long-time ambition to have a beautiful kitchen similar to what she has seen in Mrs. Prestofsn's house, the woman she works for. She is proud of her son and of living in America: "So long my Aby is with America, I want to make myself for an American." One of the ways she believes that she can become more American is by following the norms of the middle and upper-class Americans; one such norm is painting the rented kitchen white. She sees that as a way of being superior to her fellow immigrant neighbors and a way to make her son proud upon his return. After finishing it, she boasts about her achievement. The landlord finds out about it and increases the rent several times. In the end, Hanneh destroys the kitchen just before the arrival of Aby, her son, because she could not afford to pay for the rent anymore.

Hannah Hayyeh, the Jewish female immigrant attempts and fails to Americanize her private household space. The end of the short story shows an unhappy assimilated Jew. She desperately wanted to embellish something that did not belong to her. Her husband repeatedly reminds her that she wastes money on painting a kitchen that is not theirs.

It is a way to remind immigrants that they are foreigners and will never be treated equally with the white native population. Hanneh is thrilled about the new concept of democracy, as explained to her by Mrs. Preston, and believes that "everybody in America is going to be with everybody alike." (2). It appears as though she is trying to escape her Jewish roots and fully embrace the American values and traditions.

In her article "Whitening Domestic Spaces: Enacting Female Roles in Anzia Yezierska's *The Lost Beautifulnes*" (2019), Rebecca Campos Ferreras speaks about "the concept of hygiene and domesticity" as part of the Jewish cultural assimilation and of "shaping their identities according to the new standard of beauty and cleanliness related to the Americanness they were eager to perform." (9)

Yezierska's characters, in their aspiration towards equality, believe in the concepts of American beauty, cleanliness, and femininity as ways to be acknowledged by the white middle and upper-class community beyond the Jewish Lower East Side Neighborhood. However, "when her characters attempt to imitate the American feminine archetype, they realize their impossibility to maintain this identity and inhabit high-class standards without completely detaching from their Jewishness" (Campos, "Philanthropic" 78). An identity crisis occurs which "eventually makes them aware of their social exclusion and their need of redefining womanhood" (78)

Yezierska's women wander between "two cultural worlds apparently impossible to merge" (Campos "Philanthropic" 79) by conceiving Americanization and going beyond social class borders in close relationship to cleanliness and hygiene and trying to imitate the American archetypes.

Hanneh wants to paint her kitchen white because she wanted to imitate Mrs. Preston, an upper-class woman: "By day and by night it burned in me the picture - my kitchen shining all white like yours, till I couldn't rest till I done it." (4). She thinks that having a similar kitchen with Mrs. Preston would gain her a similar social position. "To produce a greater social impact on her transition toward Americanness, she boasts about her recently painted kitchen to all her neighbors. Moreover, Mrs. Preston's promise to visit her makes Hanneh "a potential American Lady" in front of her neighbors. They witness "her close relation to an upper-class American Lady" (Campos "Philanthropic" 84).

Mrs. Preston was strangely shaken by Hanneh Hayyeh's consuming passion for beauty, which made Hanneh always feel important, although she did not realize the irony in Mrs. Preston's voice: "You make the lowest nobody feel he's somebody." "You are not a 'nobody,' Hanneh Hayyeh. You are an artist - an artist laundress." "What mean you an artist?" "An artist

is so filled with love for the beautiful that he has to express it in some way. You express it in your washing just as a painter paints it in a picture.” (4)

Mrs. Preston calls her “an artist laundress,” which clarifies the social inequality between the two women: she is an artist in the job she practices so well, a laundress. Later on, when Hanneh refuses Mrs. Preston’s offer to lend her the money for the rent and invokes the need for change and justice, Mrs. Preston’s answer: “We can’t change the order of things overnight.... We ‘re doing our best” (7) shows her reluctance to change the status quo of class relations.

Painting a kitchen white does not earn the status of an American lady for Hanneh. Her economic instability, social status, and ethnic identity do not allow that. She cannot solve her identity crisis by imitating American archetypes - the American Lady- to access middle and upper-class communities. Cleanliness is not a route to citizenship and becoming American. The American ‘democracy’ is not based on intercultural exchange but economic resources. Hanneh is limited to her social status as “an artist laundress.”

Hanneh transforms the white paint into a symbolic path towards Americanization. The house is the only space where Jewish women with domestic responsibilities could have the authority to manipulate. She struggles not to be identified as uncleaned by assimilating to the standards of beauty associated with household care. She does not want to acquire Victorian femininity and whiteness by cosmetic means to be acknowledged as an American lady archetype and not a “greenhorn” - non-native American - archetype. She knows that white is the color of Anglo-Saxon heritage. However, she does not know that the East European Jews have not been accepted as white Americans.

The Jewish people have a specific way of talking and behaving; they are always eager to speak, they are exuberant and lively, at least that is the general atmosphere in the first half of the story, e.g., the scene at the butcher’s where everyone is chit-chatting is very vivid). When Hanneh is promised that Mrs. Preston will visit her, she can’t wait to tell everyone. Moreover, her whole world turns upside down when her landlord starts taking more and more advantage of them and starts increasing the rent. The landlord has a German name, Mr. Rosenblatt, which is symbolic. It symbolizes the oppressor, the Germans, during WW2. It is also important that it is not an American name, like Mrs. Preston. The landlord symbolizes that although America - represented by Mrs. Preston - is willing to accept her and to let her live the American Dream, the life-long enemy of the Jewish people will continue to oppress them, to take their possessions, and to suck the life out of them, the same way they did during the Holocaust. The only force driving Mr. Rosenblatt is money: “If you can’t pay, somebody else will. I got to look out for myself. [...] Because the flat is painted new, I can get more money for it. I got no more time for you.” (6)

She can only deal with the situation in her despair by cursing the landlord and assimilating him with the Devil.

As Mrs. Preston offers to help Hanneh by lending her money, she refuses as she is too proud to accept charity. We see her Jewish roots here, as it is a fact that Jewish people are proud and hard-workers in preserving their values.

Hanneh trusts America and the American justice system so much that she decides to take the landlord to court, genuinely believing she has a real chance of winning. She believes that she can make a difference and that all the people in America, irrespective of race and social status, are equal: “I’ll fight till all America will have to stop and listen to me [...] I got to give to America - the last breath in my body for justice. I’ll wake up America from its sleep.” (7)

As she prepares for the trial after the landlord raises her rent a second time, the neighbors gossiping at the beginning of the story have now become supporters of Hanneh’s and have put all their hopes in her, giving her the informal role of a leader: “If Hanneh Hayyeh with her fire in her mouth couldn’t get her rights, then where are we?” (8) Her role of a leader

and her subsequent defeat is symbolic of the Jewish people's fate: they too were temporarily defeated and almost destroyed by the Nazis.

However, her son's return, only to find his mother evicted, is somehow a symbol of the resurrection they are capable of. Although she believed in the USA and the possibilities the Americans could provide, she starts to question them: "Is this already America? What for was my Aby fighting?" (8)

The answer she gives herself is the awareness of failure. The myth of the American Dream does not exist: "Was it then only a dream? All these millions of people from all lands and from all times, wishing and hoping and praying that America is? Did I wake myself from my dreaming to see myself back in the black times of Russia under the czar?" (8).

Her desperation grows as she realizes that she has to leave her apartment and her beautifully painted kitchen and reaches a climax when blinded with anger and frustration, she starts destroying everything in the kitchen throughout the night. As dawn comes, she realizes that although she wanted to spite the landlord in her rage for vengeance, she ultimately hurt herself: "it was her soul she had killed. These walls that stared at her in their ruin were not just walls. They were animate [...] For every inch of the broken plaster, there was a scar on her heart. She had destroyed that which had taken her so many years of prayer and longing to build up." (9)

Destroying the kitchen, she killed the American Dream, her hopes and dreams. Still, she had a quiver for life, much like the Jewish people who managed to survive the horrible historical events they had gone through.

The theme of family is very expressive in this short story. Hanneh is desperately trying to beautify her apartment while waiting for her son's arrival. She mentions that she would do anything for her son several times and is very proud of him.

Deep down inside, Hanneh is an artist who cannot reveal herself. She shows her artistic side through the painting of the kitchen, through how she does Mrs. Preston's laces and batistes: "You do my laces and batistes as no one else ever has. It's as if you breathed part of your soul into it." (3) When her neighbors see her beautiful kitchen, they wish that she may live to see her son get married from this kitchen and that all sorts of good things may happen to her in her kitchen.

All in all, Hanneh is a simple Jewish woman who wants to live the American Dream, who thinks that she can do it, but who is ultimately betrayed by this very American Dream. She tries to leave her Jewish identity behind, only to be rejected by the American community. In the end, she remains desolate, although new opportunities arise through her son's return. At the end of the short story, the rain symbolizes this new beginning that is yet to come. It is also a symbol of the fact that her past must be drowned and forgotten, and they should start from scratch.

Conclusion

A social realist, Anzia Yeziarska exposed the inconsistencies and inequalities of American urban life by exploring the tensions inherent in Jewish immigrant life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. She depicted the impact of social class and ethnicity on American life around the turn of the twentieth century, emphasizing the difficulties faced by women.

Yeziarska uses literature as an important instrument of social change and reform. Her rebellion against patriarchal values and her pursuit of independence made her embrace the American Dream in an idealistic way initially. However, later on, she became frustrated by its shallowness and the alienation from her roots.

Eastern European women immigrants struggled to find a place for themselves both within their traditional Jewish culture (enculturation) and within American society (acculturation)

Yeziarska attempted to explain that Jewish immigrants cannot fulfill the American Dream through Americanizing their experiences. She proposes a hybrid identity to survive the American context. “Yeziarska’s stories solve the identity conflict by declaring cultural amalgamation as the only means possible to aspire to Americanization” (Campos “Philanthropic” 91)

The hybrid identity embracing both her American and ethnic identity, allowing her to validate her Jewish cultural background while participating in the American lifestyle, proved to be a better solution for Yeziarska’s characters than complete assimilation and acculturation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ferreras, Rebecca Campos (2019). “Philanthropic Classism: Americanization as a Controversial Rite of Passage in Anzia Yeziarska’s Fiction,” *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, vol. 23, 2019. Seville, Spain, ISSN 1133-309-X, pp. 71-93. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/REN.2019.i23.04>

Ferreras, Rebecca Campos. (2019). “Whitening Domestic Spaces: Enacting Female Roles in Anzia Yeziarska’s *The Lost Beautifulness*.” *The Grove. Working Papers on English Studies* 26 (2019): 9-26, DOI: 10.17561/grove.v26.al

<https://idus.us.es/bitstream/handle/11441/101229/4.CAMPOS.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
file:///C:/Users/Anda/AppData/Local/Temp/Whitening_Domestic_Spaces_Enacting_Femal.pdf

Nerad, J.C. 2009, “Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature,” *African American Review*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 206-208.

Rottenberg, C. 2007, “Begging to Differ: Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and Anzia Yeziarska’s *Arrogant Beggar*,” *African American Review*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 87-98.

Rottenberg, Catherine (2008). *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature*. Dartmouth, NH: UP of New England, 180 pp

Rubin, Steven J. (1988) “American-Jewish Autobiography, 1912 to the Present.” *Handbook of American-Jewish Literature. An Analytical Guide to Topics, Themes, and Sources*. Ed. Fried, Lewis. New York: Greenwood Press, 287.

Yeziarska, Anzia. “America and I” (1923). *Anzia-Yeziarska-America-and-I.pdf* - OpenCUNY, (pp1-7)

https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/eng2100fall19/files/2019/09/Yeziarska-Anzia_America-and-I.pdf

-----, (1920). “The Lost Beautifulness.” National Humanities Center Organization: Anzia Yeziarska, “The Lost Beautifulness” and “Soap and ...”, (pp1-9)

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/people/text6/yeziarska.pdf>