

Migration and Personal Identity in Writings of the Jewish Writer, Anzia Yeziarska

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Abstract

Jewish migration stands as a poignant memorial to the historical pogroms and discrimination endured by human beings in the modern era. This intricate and profound process of migration gives rise to numerous political, social, and economic challenges for both the countries and the people involved. It transcends the simple act of moving from one place to another, encompassing a multifaceted journey viewed from various perspectives. This research examines the influence of one Jewish author, Anzia Yeziarska, whose writings often draw from her own autobiographical experience, particularly in her works "America and I" and "How I Found America", and how her sufferings are represented in the modern literature by delving deeply into literary works, critical analyses, and historical studies. The data analysis shows that there is a strong relationship between the American dream and the homeland in shaping the migrants dreams. These works share common themes, including a strong bond with the land, prejudices and respect. These two stories have their similarities and differences, and altogether are unique parts of the Jewish migration mosaic. It looks at the aversions against the human beings, representation of prejudice against the population forced to leave from one place to another. The data analysis demonstrates the continued relevance of migration narratives and aspirations in contemporary literature as a memorial of remembrance for young generations. "America and I" and "How I Found America" poignantly depict the suffering of Jews, highlighting both similarities and contrasts between their homeland and the promise of "America, the land of opportunity." Together, these stories contribute to the rich tapestry of Jewish migration, a testament to the resilience and struggles faced by a people seeking a better life. In order to obtain a more profound comprehension of the influence of migration on the personal identity of the writers, scholars should conduct multidisciplinary investigations. Comparative studies, literary analysis classes, and stimulating seminars will all contribute to understanding.

Keywords: migration, America, the American dream, homeland, promised land.

Introduction

In our contemporary and dynamic world, we encounter various challenges, and one of the most profound and enduring issues is migration. Throughout history, the world has grappled with this matter. The desire for freedom to choose our residence, own property, participate in governance, as a form of individual or group adaptation to changes in the economic and political environment (Chapman, 1980), and above all, be treated with dignity as human beings, all play significant roles in migration's complexity. Deborah Appleman and Margaret Reed, in their introduction to *Braided Lives: An anthology of multicultural American writing* (Appleman, 1991), suggest that "People become avid

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readers when they find their personal meaning in literature. We read with conviction, commitment, and motivation those works that reflect our own experiences or histories or speak to us in ways that are real and true” (p.9) While some define migration as the movement of people from one place to another, it encompasses much more than mere physical relocation. Migration is a multifaceted and transformative process, entailing political, social, and economic complexities for both the countries and individuals involved. It is marked by hardships and struggles, with some fortunate enough to have access to suitable transportation, while many others endure overcrowded, unhygienic, and unpleasant conditions. For certain groups like the Jews, additional challenges arise due to the lack of kosher food on ships, making their journey even more arduous as they are packed together under harsh conditions akin to cattle. The majority of people experienced seasickness during the arduous journey. One account detailed the distressing state of unsanitary bathrooms, which must have been truly torturous. Nevertheless, most immigrants endured the dreadful trip with the hope that the freedom they would attain at the other end would make it all worthwhile. Upon arrival, the people formed lines and walked past a doctor, attempting to conceal any physical issues. Children over the age of two were expected to walk independently. The doctor would mark those needing further examination with chalk and isolate them in a designated area. Another assessment involved testing mental stability. An interpreter would pose a few questions to determine each person's cognitive soundness. The word "immigration" often evokes an image of impoverished, uneducated individuals crossing borders in search of minimum-wage jobs and opportunities for a better future.

This paper focuses on the profound topic of Jewish migration, exploring the shattered dreams, hopes, pains, and disappointments experienced throughout the tumultuous cycles of pogrom and migration. Within this context, our focus will be on a comparative analysis of two poignant stories written by the Jewish author Anzia Yeziarska: "America and I" and "How I found America." Yeziarska follows the footsteps of Rachel Akerman (1522–1544), the first female Jewish poet to write poetry in German. (Zinberg, 1975; p.51) By examining the similarities and differences between these narratives, we uncover unique elements that contribute to the broader mosaic of Jewish migration. Through this exploration, we gain insight into the resilience and rebirth exhibited by the Jewish community amidst their challenging journey. Anzia Yeziarska, a Jewish-American novelist, was born in MałyPłock, Poland, during the time it was part of the Russian Empire. Her stories offered American readers a glimpse into the world of the Jewish immigrant, a world Yeziarska decorated with a colorful cast of characters: the passionate immigrant girl striving for love and acceptance (Levinson, 2008: p.93) Furthermore, her stories often reference the Russian Czar and Cossacks, reflecting her early life experiences. As a child, she emigrated to the United States with her parents, settling in the immigrant community of the Lower East Side in Manhattan. In her literary works, she vividly portrayed the challenges faced by Jewish and Puerto Rican immigrants living in this New York neighborhood. Throughout her career, Anzia Yeziarska delved into the complexities of acculturation and assimilation among immigrants. Her stories offer valuable insights into the concept of liberation, particularly concerning Jewish immigrant women. She eloquently captured the sacrifices made by individuals and families in pursuit of a better life, turning these sacrifices into a symbol of resistance and a fresh beginning while upholding their unique identities, cultures, and traditions.

“American Dream”

Many different social and ethnic groups have migrated to America to start new lives, thus influencing the American identity in the aftermath of the Great Depression, as well as the social stigma of failure. (Ramadani, 2021) The Jewish people, like many other ethnic groups, encountered numerous challenges in their pursuit of a better life. As newcomers to this country, they faced the difficulties of adapting to unfamiliar surroundings, enduring harsh living conditions, and combating religious and ethnic prejudices. Despite

these unfair social circumstances, they managed to seize economic opportunities and customize their approach to life, resulting in the Jewish community becoming a resilient and influential force in today's society. The struggles and sacrifices endured during their settlement in this new land were filled with pain and devastation. Anzia Yeziarska, a migrant herself, vividly captures and conveys the anguish experienced by migrants. Her writings reflect the arduous journey of self-discovery in America, where starting a new life posed a significant challenge. "America and I" narrates a tale marked by suffering and relentless efforts, representing the embodiment of a dream. The short story portrays various themes, including poverty and determination. It revolves around the author's dream of discovering America and pursuing a better life. Her fiction dramatizes the hope for acceptance and dialogue, emphasizing on democratic participation and tolerance of diversity. (Shiffman, 2015: p.155) However, this dream is met with a harsh reality as she encounters the challenges faced by her family, who came from the same origin but settled in America and became assimilated, seemingly forgetting the struggles of starting a new life there. The author reflects on her journey to find work that allows her to express her creativity, embodying the America she had envisioned. Yeziarska's arrival in America is fueled by the aspiration to forge a new life, one that eluded her and her ancestors in Russia. She envisions a life liberated from constant toil for survival, allowing her to articulate her creative voice.

In "America and I", Yeziarska delves into the concept of the "Russian soul," a unique essence that sets it apart from other ethnicities. Her identity is rooted in a background marked by incomprehensible struggles, discrimination, and toil, where the constant fear of violence and erratic injustice prevailed. Yeziarska herself embodies the traumatic cultural separation and disenfranchisement that developed during this period of American history. (Burris, 2022: p.23) In Russia, the Jewish people had limited opportunities to pursue their true aspirations, trapped by societal constraints. However, Yeziarska's spirit contains a reservoir of untapped potential: unexpressed colors, silenced songs, and unrealized romance stifled in the darkness of the Old World. Yeziarska perceives the distance with the Americans, who fail to grasp her profound emotions. Nevertheless, she realizes that by documenting the immigrant experience, she can share aspects of her culture with them. Her writing becomes a bridge that spans the gap between her world and theirs, contributing to the ever-evolving fabric of American culture.

Despite her inability to speak English and her lack of work skills or training, she finds herself working as a maid for an Americanized Russian family. Although uncertain about her earnings, she dedicates herself to the job, grateful for the chance to live with Americans and learn English. Another challenge is confronted to her like any other Jewish women trying to learn (Jelen, 2008: p.157) Her aspiration of financial independence. Eagerly anticipating her first month's wages, she plans to use the money to buy new clothes and embrace an American appearance. Unfortunately, the family disappoints her by refusing to pay. Instead, they assert that she should be grateful for the opportunities they've given her, claiming she is worthless without English proficiency. Disheartened and penniless, she immediately decides to leave the family, losing her trust in Americanized immigrants. Her journey to make friends proves to be a relentless struggle, as she recalls her experiences

“There had been no end to my day – working for the “American” family” (2002, p. 1731).

America has transformed into something she never anticipated, a place she tried to flee from, but her past continues to pursue her in this new land. Consequently, she begins to question herself “What am I? Who am I? Why I am here? Alongside numerous comparable contemplations, these reflections lead to a fundamental question “Where is America??” To experience America fully, she must secure a job that not only provides sustenance but also grants her some leisure time. Despite having more free time and better pay, she remains dissatisfied due to her limited proficiency in English.

“I had become free from the worry for bread and rent, but I was not happy” (1920, p.73)
 “I want to do something with my head, my feelings. All day long, only with my hands I work.”

And the teacher at the factory tells her

“First you must learn English. Put your mind on that, and then we’ll see” (2002, p.1732).

Upon receiving counsel from her teacher that learning the language would resolve her issue, Yeziarska dedicated herself to mastering reading and writing in English. Once she achieves proficiency, she approaches the teacher once more. Following the advice, she decides to join a social club organized by American women, which aims to assist immigrant girls.

Home vs new land

Anzia Yeziarska's short stories, "America and I" and "How I Found America," bear striking similarities, as they intertwine to depict the arduous journey of the Jewish population from Russia to the new land of America. Both stories resonate with strong disapproval towards humanity, showcasing the prejudice faced by those compelled to leave their homes for new horizons. Yeziarska's own migration from Russia to America at the tender age of fifteen imprinted enduring memories, a phase in every young person's life that leaves an indelible mark. The Russian Czar's decree, or "ukase," acted as a force pushing people from their villages, shattering their dreams and extinguishing the hopes of youth yearning for a better life.

In "America and I," the author avoids direct references to her homeland in Russia, whereas in "How I found America," she initiates her narrative from a small house where her father endeavors to educate young boys. Placing the story in Russia, I believe, would have diluted its potency in expressing the darkness and disappointment she feels towards America. The author recognizes herself as one among millions who entered America with aspirations and dreams of a new, promising life. From her Russian perspective, America stands as the Promised Land, offering "wings for my stifled spirit." Anzia yearns to craft a life vastly different from her parents', one where she can pursue her passions and love her work, rather than being solely driven by hunger and basic necessities.

In “How I found America” she represents a situation similar to the one I experienced in Kosovo in the 90ties of the last century, when we were expelled from our schools and we were trying to keep up the education by getting educated in private houses, mosques, churches and many times we were chased and beaten by Serbian police and military. Her father was teaching children ancient poetry of the Hebrew race, in the middle of the only room in the house. Cossack would come and shout

“No chadir [Hebrew school] shall be held in a room used for cooking and sleeping.” (1920, p.73)

The justification to restrict chadir in the room used to sleep or cook, is senseless, having in mind that poor people had only one room for the entire family in the best case.

“A thousand-rubble’ fine, or a year in prison, if you are ever found again teaching children where you’re eating and sleeping”. (p.73)

In her homeland, she is pursued and prohibited from learning or being taught in her native language, even amidst poverty and dire circumstances that her family endures, while her parents struggle to provide the basic necessities of food and shelter for her. It is difficult for them to grasp the full extent of your challenges, but they find solace in the Yiddish words her mother uses to alleviate her pain – expressions like "Oi weh!" and "Gottuniu!" seem to momentarily relieve the burden of terror, humiliation and the pogrom they are experiencing every moment.

On the other hand, experience in a new country is painful as she described in her story

“For long, long time my heart ached and ached like a sore wound. If murderers would have robbed me and killed me it wouldn’t have hurt me so much. I couldn’t think through my pain” (2002: p.1731)

moving from one devastation to an even greater one, stripped bare of their pain, they find themselves in a foreign land they fled to seeking salvation from the afflictions caused by their own people. In this new country, they go through a process of acculturation, gradually assimilating into what is known as "America." However, America is not a fixed entity; rather, it evolves through the contributions and efforts of both migrants and those who have lived there for generations. People who arrive in America seeking a fresh start must relinquish everything they once possessed in their home country, much like the author's experience. However, their sense of trepidation emerges when acculturated compatriots reveal a different reality, that they should:

“should be thankful to associate with ‘Americans’”(p.1729)

In her homeland, Yezierska and her compatriots had little chance for economic improvement, but in America, they can break free from the monotonous struggle for survival. Yezierska’s soul and spirit were “stifled” in the Old World, but in America, Yezierska can celebrate her ability to give voice to her own forms of self-expression.

In "America and I," the author embarks on a personal quest to discover her own America. Through her writing, she represents the voiceless individuals who are unable to express themselves, giving her stories a broader, universal significance. These tales not only resonate with Eastern European Jewish immigrants like herself but also with anyone who has undergone the transformative journey of leaving their homeland and seeking assimilation into a new culture, while also enriching it. Yezierska skillfully employs symbolism to convey her emotions and perceptions of America, establishing a strong connection between her use of symbolic elements and the imagery she employs to portray this complex issue.

“They looked at me up and down”, expresses her disappointment when she was treated by the landlords, and “all the hunger and darkness”(2002, pp.1731)

are the images of darkness interplayed to express her spiritual state in her journey towards standing for her rights in the new land.

Finally, upon the accomplishment of the dream, arrival in America, end of pogrom, they still fight for their spiritual peace

“I had become free from the worry of bread and rent, but I was not happy” (p.78)

implying that happiness was not just a surface-level emotion but rather deeply connected to one's heart and emotional well-being. Restless discontent in the heart had a profound effect, consuming individuals from within like a gnawing pain in their very souls. Although freed from the constraints of immediate physical needs, the longing within the soul intensified, surpassing the emptiness of a hungry stomach.

Representation of images

Yezierska skillfully employs vivid imagery to paint a rich tapestry of her stories, emotions, and experiences both in her old country and in America. Within her narratives, she expresses moments of elation, disappointment, and hope. Her disappointment is particularly evident as she employs the contrasting imagery of light and darkness to illustrate her transition from Russia to America. Through these powerful visuals, she conveys her aspirations and dreams for a better life in the new world

“sunlight burning through my darkness”, (2002, p.1729)

and this is a beautiful interplay of images of sun and darkness, which represent the freedom, that gives her hopes in her prison, death beaten by the prison bars which turn into violation, showing her great hope for the future. To this end she has used light and

darkness to portray her feelings. She used sunlight to symbolize the hopes and dreams of a better life while darkness is used to symbolize the hopelessness and disparity she felt in Russia.

“In America were rooms without sunlight; rooms to sleep in, to eat in, to cook in, but without sunshine, and Gedalyah Mindel was happy.”(1920, p.76)

In “America and I” is also used quite often the imagery of cold, “Four cold eyes turned on me”(2002, p.1729), after she asked for her right to get paid for job she was doing for the couple. The imagery of coldness is present also claiming “they looked at me with sudden coldness” which makes her wander

“what have I said to draw away from me their warmth?”(2002, p.1729)

representing landlords influence in her feeling cold and lonely. Also this image of coldness is closely linked with hunger, starvation and loneliness

“I was driven to cold and hunger. I could no longer pay for my mattress on the floor. I no longer could buy the bite in my mouth” (2002, p.1732)

The same loneliness is felt in “How I found America”: “A loneliness for the fragrant silence of the woods that lay beyond our mud hut welled up in my heart, a longing for the soft, responsive earth of our village streets. All about me was the hardness of brick and stone, the smells of crowded poverty”. (1920, p.76)

“I looked up, and met the steady gaze of eyes shining with light. In a moment all my anger fled”. (p.79)

The author finds solace in the belief that after every dark period, there will be a time of light, and after disappointment, hope will emerge. Her encounter with a person who exudes hope becomes a symbol of America itself. The moment an American offers her help becomes a significant milestone in her journey. Until then, nothing had felt genuine to her, and she longed for something like a protective shelter for her vulnerable heart. Perhaps, her longing is that “Jews could become a people like all other peoples, and antisemitism would cease to exist” (Arendt, 1946). Despite facing overwhelming devastation, her faith in America never wavers. Her hopes and dreams for her life in America are repeatedly expressed through imagery of flames, fire, and light. Even sunlight is described as “burning through my darkness,” signifying her passionate yearning for positive change. She firmly believes that America possesses the power to transform her life for the better. In her perspective, America is not synonymous with the harsh realities of the sweatshops or the deceitful actions of her fellow countrymen who betrayed her trust. Instead, she envisions America as a work-in-progress, a realm of glory that is still unfolding and evolving.

“Fired up by this revealing light, I began to build a bridge of understanding between the American-born and myself. Since their life was shut out from such as me, I began to open up my life and the lives of my people to them.” (2002, p.1729)

This was just another imagine of light warmed her heart, gave her strength to pursue chasing her dream, because this was the right way to find America and remember her life in the village in Russia.

Conclusion

Mobility of people across borders is as old as history. Some scholars say migration is the movement of people from one place to another. Migration is more than just the movement of people from one place to another. In this paper, the focus was on the Jewish migration, shattered dreams and hopes, pains, disappointments and rebirth after every cycle of pogrom and migration. I analyzed and compared two stories by the Jewish author Anzia

Yeziarska, “America and I” and “How I found America”. These two stories have their similarities and differences, and altogether are unique parts of the Jewish migration mosaic.

Both stories are full of aversions against human beings, a representation of prejudice against the population forced to leave from one place to another. Yeziarska migrated from Russia to America when she was about fifteen, a period of time in the age of every youngster when they remember everything and is marked forever in their memories. While in “America and I” the author doesn’t refer to the homeland in Russia, in “How I found America” author starts her story from the small house where her father was trying to teach little boys to read and learn. If the author would have placed her story in Russia, I think it would not have been so powerful in expressing the darkness and disappointment towards America. In “How I found America” she represents a situation similar to the one I experienced in Kosovo in the 90ties of the last century, when we were expelled from our schools and were trying to keep up the education by getting educated in private houses, mosques, churches and many times we were chased and beaten by Serbian police and military.

Immigrant’s letter from America wrecked the life pace and troubles and of this little village. This, Gedalyah Mindel’s letter is the link between the two stories, which Anzia Yeziarska decided to give us in order to show the life from the perspective of a person who had gone for many years to America, and as the initial connection story of the pieces of life in Russia and life in America. On the other side, the author used lots of beautiful images to portray her stories, emotions, feelings, existence in the old country as well as in America. Images of sun, cold, light, darkness represent the two worlds the Jews were living.

Therefore, the choice of the first person in the very titles of and throughout the texts serves a purpose: it produces a personal relationship between the two main characters of both texts: the writer and America. At the beginning of the texts, the writer tends to bias the reader in favour of herself. This can be seen very easily in both texts where she conveys her disillusion. The author uses this device also to convert the reader to views the latter would not normally hold having in mind the first parts of both texts. In the end of both texts, the reader favours America also, despite the disillusion and vicissitudes the writer goes through.

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