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DOLLARS TO ZLOTYS: I B SINGER'S "THE SON"

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ABSTRACT

Singer's obsession with his Polish past establishes him as a "Throwback" between America and Eastern Europe, between Past and Present. Nevertheless, he reaped umpteen gains out of his asylum called America - refuge and recognition, finally leading him to Nobel Award; and above all, America's supremo status provided him with the rostrum from which he could expound his sentiments to the whole world. Hence, one wonders at the disdainful approach Singer adopts towards a country that gave him so much. On a deeper analysis, his attitude deems singularly subtle, (at times unappreciative too, and yet not altogether imprudent, if treated on a psychological scale. Singer's tracasserie seems to be not with American culture or values, but its role in his own life as an accommodating unit.

Key words: Short fiction, Polish Jew, America, Refuge, Polish-American Immigrant

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Prologue

For those familiar with Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Enemies, a love story, The Penitent*, or some of his short fiction, the portrayal of an 'immigrant Jew' (as described by the first generation of Jews from Pale) illustrates the prototype of a transplanted figure, unable to be congruent with America – a land that had harbored him in exile. The author's note in the collection *THE FRIEND OF KAFKA AND OTHER STORIES* reads: "About a one third of stories in this collection are about immigrants in United States, where I have now lived a longer time than in the country of my birth, Poland..." Though English had become his second tongue over the years, and America his second homestead, one cannot fail to discern the subtle derision and wistfulness in Singer's America – based short stories – his awe, his disillusionment, his futile fury, his feeling of extraneousness, and his sense of belonging – all blended so as to make a Nobel laureate out of this Polish – American immigrant.

Nostalgia is Singer's forte. He resurrects the haunted world of the Polish ghettos and their inhabitants with typical Jewish Yiddish expressions, humor, food, festivals, Passover, funerals, superstitions, ambitions, lusts, failures and agonies. Curiously enough, the dilemma of "a quest for identity" was never Singer's problem, as with most of the other American-Jewish writers. His steadfast conviction is that, one's identity can never be lost unless one deliberately loses it, or goes after a fabricated identity. In spite of his approximately five-and-a-half decade stay in America, Singer remains yet an Émigré or one who is incapable of assimilation to American culture – "an unconstructed greenhorn", and in his vision America – his second homeland – continues to remain a claustrophobic enclave, where, "...through the eyes of one or another of his tormented, vegetarian nympholepts, Singer sees in America suggestions for new heresies, more appropriate to the end of the twentieth than the close of the seventeenth

century, discoverable perhaps only in a world in which he can never feel really at home." (Fiedler 1981)

Elaboration:

In the short story "The Son" from the collection *The Friend of Kafka and Other Stories*, as the author waits in the New York port to receive his son whom he has not seen or met for the past twenty years, he closely observes the passengers alighting the pier: "The passengers all had something in common: the fatigue of a long ocean trip, the fretfulness and unsureness of people arriving in a new country. Each one's eyes asked with disappointment: IS THIS AMERICA?" The author himself is cognizant of all the turmoil and pseudo-values that sway the New York metropolis life; and yet, he fervently wishes that his son be impressed with New York's skyscrapers, its bustle, its modernity, its intimidating atmosphere. Since the foul weather that day hampers the materialization of that wish, he grows despondent: "It hurt my dignity that New York should show itself to my son so gloomy and dingy. I had a vain ambition to have him see immediately the nicer quarters of the city." But for the son just now back from the war with the Arabs, after his close encounter with the lurking dangers in the battlefield, New York's pomp and glitter, its dazzling lights on the Broadway hold little value: "He looked and was silent." All the grandeur of New York fails to create any impact.

Singer vilipends ruthlessly the assimilated Jews, who spurn the tradition, religion and faith of their Fathers. Even more so, his subjects of contempt are those who shut their souls to the human trauma, those spiritual paralytics who harden themselves against the most human emotions, unable to embrace either the Human or the Divine wholeheartedly. While waiting in the port, the author expresses his opprobrium for the women there, - "The New York women fanned themselves, spoke all at once with hoarse voices, refreshed themselves with chocolate and Coca-Cola. A non-Jewish toughness stared out of their eyes. It was hard to believe that only a few years ago their brothers and sisters in Europe went like sheep to the slaughter."

Conclusion

Singer's obsession with his Polish past establishes him as a "Throwback" between America and Eastern Europe, between Past and Present. Nevertheless, he reaped umpteen gains out of his asylum called America - refuge and recognition, finally leading him to Nobel Award; and above all, America's supremo status provided him with the rostrum from which he could expound his sentiments to the whole world. Hence, one wonders at the disdainful approach Singer adopts towards a country that gave him so much. On a deeper analysis, his attitude deems singularly subtle, (at times unappreciative too, and yet not altogether imprudent, if treated on a psychological scale. Singer's tracasserie seems to be not with American culture or values, but its role in his own life as an accommodating unit: Hadn't there been an America, he wouldn't have had fled to America for refuge; in fact, sans America, left with no other option, he would have had the bliss of sharing martyrdom along with his perished brethren in the holocaust. America's being had deprived him of that solace. Singer accosted America, and America is all bon homie to Singer, -- and yet, cui Bono? The Jewish fantasy of finding the Promised Land in America remained a shattered dream with his nostalgic Polish ghettos only to be replaced by the everlasting Lower East Side.

Singer's angst combined with an irksome nostalgia and supported by his own inability to shed his Jewishness, make him superimpose himself on his alter ego. Polish zlotys could be exchanged for American dollars, but never a Poland for an America, nor a traditional past for a transitional present. No wonder, as Jha points out (Jha 1986), Singer becomes identical with the myriads of artistic 'demons' he had created in the fluid world of Metro New York.

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