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Hannah Hayyeh and the Destruction of the American Dream and Identity

There are many reasons why people immigrate to America; however, it seems plausible to argue that most come here with the intention of establishing their own version of the “American Dream.” By this, I mean that those who immigrate to this country tend to be seeking similar things: freedom—particularly religious freedom—and happiness. The same can be said of the Jewish immigrants of the 19th century, who came to this country seeking a welcoming home as well as opportunity. However, the American Dream is called a “dream” for a reason. It is just not always possible. Some may argue that as a Jewish immigrant, it is impossible.

Although I do not want to stretch this argument that far, I do want to look at the Jewish American immigrant experience through history and literature to analyze the real implications of this immigrant experience for trying to reconcile one’s Jewish and American identities in relation to the American Dream. This idea is especially exemplified in Anzia Yezierska’s “The Lost ‘Beautifulness,’” which showcases just how cruel and destructive the reconciliation of these two identities can be. The downfall and destruction of Hannah Hayyeh’s vision of America is a good representation of what many immigrant Jews were going through at this time period. Namely, the complication of identity that results from hope in the American Dream and the crushing reality of its impossibility.

A common trend in literature about Jewish American immigrant experience is the initial optimism of the American Dream before the reality of its deceitfulness. In a letter written to her parents sometime in the 1790s, Jewish American Rebecca Samuel writes that she is appreciative of the seeming unity in the United States: “Anyone can do what he wants. There is no rabbi in all of America to excommunicate anyone. This is a blessing here; Jew and Gentile are as one” (39). It is difficult to tell what Samuel’s exact tone here is regarding the idea of this level of autonomy, but it seems to be positive. She describes it as a “blessing,” and even writes “all live at peace” (39). This idea is also in Yeziarska’s short story “The Lost ‘Beautifulness.’” In her efforts to paint her kitchen white to make it beautiful, Hannah Heyyeh gets excited about American opportunity because she, too, agrees that in America, we have democracy, which means all are treated as one. She tells her husband, “Democracy means that everybody in America is going to be with everybody alike” (45). One can see why this idea is so appealing. No matter who you are—Gentile or Jew—*everyone* in America is equal. Everyone in America has a chance. Especially for a Jew, America described in this way would be very attractive because the Jewish people have a history of being exiled from their homelands. If America is a place that welcomes all, it makes sense as to why Jewish immigrants would seek out the United States as a place of refuge.

Hannah’s dream of American autonomy and opportunity is manifested through her “beautifulness,” which is what she calls her white-painted kitchen; it is through sharing this beauty that she is able to bring together a community that is starving for hope. There are almost no references to religious rites and/or practices throughout the story, but the characters that Hannah leads to the kitchen to view her “beautifulness” seem to have something like a religious

experience that unites them closer together. When the other Jewish immigrants see Hannah's newly-painted kitchen, they speak of it as if it were holy ground: "God from the hold! To step with our feet on this new painted floor?" (48). The other Jewish characters are not the only people affected by the kitchen either. Mrs. Preston, Hannah's inspiration for the American Dream, is also greatly moved by Hannah's zeal for beauty, as shown by her kitchen: "Mrs. Preston was strangely shaken by Hannah Heyyeh's consuming passion for beauty. She looked deep into the eyes of the Russian Jewess as if drinking in the secret of their hidden glow" (51). At the beginning of the story, Hannah's situation seems quite pessimistic. She and her husband work long hours with little reward, they are very poor, and her son is gone fighting in a war. However, Hannah's passion and her kitchen have a great positive effect on her community—both Jewish and Gentile. It seems like a small thing, but Hannah's community is better able to hope in humanity and the American Dream because of her and her kitchen.

Although her community is renewed from her passion, soon Hannah's idea of America drastically changes, which causes her to question her identity and her perception of the American Dream. As previously mentioned, Hannah's view of America is democratic; her vision of this is everyone united in equality. When Hannah protests the landlord's unjust action of raising her apartment's rent five dollars higher, he replies, "I got to look out for myself. In America everybody looks out for himself" (53). This does not follow Hannah's understanding of America. She is so appalled by the landlord's injustice, she takes him to court in order to get what she thinks she deserves. Instead of justice, Hannah loses the trial and is described as feeling both "[h]opeless and dead" (58). Hannah's view on her American identity completely changes because of this series of events. She goes from a hopeful woman who influences the community

that she lives in to find beauty and goodness in something so simple, to an almost lifeless individual with little hope. Because of all of this injustice, Hannah questions whether or not America was what she thought it was in the first place: “What for was my Aby fighting? Was it only a dream? All these millions of people from all lands and from all times, wishing and hoping and praying that America is?” (59-60). For Hannah, America is more than a place where she lives. It is what she identifies with. Not only that, her very own son—whom she claims she does everything for the sake of—is fighting unwittingly for this injustice.

Like Hannah Heyyeh, in a different letter, Rebecca Samuel talks about her realization of her failed American Dream, which complicates her Jewish identity. In her first letter, she writes of the peace and unity among Americans, but in a later one, she describes her discontent of Jewish American assimilation: “Jewishness is pushed aside here. There are here ten or twelve Jews, and they are not worthy of being called Jews” (*NA* 39). Although she originally wrote about how “Jews and Gentiles are as one” (39), she has an unfortunate realization of her failed vision of America. Samuel’s vision of the American Dream is different than Hannah’s; however, like Hannah, Samuel also finds herself in a situation that seems unfixable. Almost hopeless, she tells her parents that it is utterly impossible to raise her children as Jews in America; Hannah and Samuel both are deprived of their pleasant visions of America. This results in the impossible reconciliation of both of their Jewish and American identities.

Not only is Hannah’s American identity complicated from this event, but also her Jewish identity. As previously mentioned, apart from cultural references like a kosher butcher, Yiddish language, and context on Russia, there are not many distinctly Jewish attributes to this short

story. I argue, however, that this in itself is an important fact. Hannah herself, it seems, finds her hope and faith in the American identity—not in her Jewish one. However, when the community finds out that Hannah was not able to win the court case, they cry in anger saying, “Nobody cares. Nobody hears our cry!” (58). Nobody could mean the landlords, American society, the court system, etc., but it also could mean God himself. The Jews in this short story group themselves all together as one people. When Hannah cannot get justice, the community acts as one, using the pronoun “us” instead of “you” in this context. For example, the people say, “*Our* life lays in their hands,” and “They can choke *us* so much as they like!” (59, my emphasis). These sentiments are very similar to what Rebecca Samuel writes in her letters about growing up in an increasingly secular community. She writes, “We are completely isolated here. We do not have any friends” (NA 39). The concept of aloneness and abandonment seem to be a common theme within both nonfiction and fictional material about Jewish immigrants. There is a stark contrast between the Jews in the Gentiles in this short story because Mrs. Preston, on the other hand, who is not Jewish, is treated differently by Hannah. Hannah may have confided in her, but she ultimately finds sympathy within her Jewish community. Perhaps Hannah’s Jewish identity is more important to Hannah’s character than the reader assumes. Regardless, this double identity that Hannah attempts to reconcile within the plot is not resolved, but rather complicated.

While wrestling with her beliefs in America and her understanding of who she is as an American Jew, Hannah takes out her frustration in a way that she believes will relieve some of her interior trauma, but to no avail. Just as Hannah manifested her joy and hopefulness into her beloved painted kitchen, she manifests her anger and fury into the destruction of same very kitchen. Her attempt is to hurt the landlord through this act, but “it [is] her own soul she [kills]”

(Yeziarska 60). The disillusionment of the American identity and dream come to a head when she demolishes the one thing that gave her hope for the improvement of her life. She is confused by her American Jewishness, feels as if all of America is against her, and becomes completely isolated by the end of this short story.

Many immigrants—whether Jewish or not—come to this country seeking refuge and a new life. While this American Dream is certainly a pleasant vision, it seems as if it is impossible for certain groups of people who are perhaps at a disadvantage. Although Hannah Hayyeh had full hope in this American Dream, to the point where solely saw it as her identity, she was not able to fulfill this dream. Regardless of the sadness of her story, Hannah's character in "The Lost 'Beautifulness'" provides a good example of what many Jewish American immigrants were wrestling with at this time period—that is the reconciling of their different identities as both Jews and Americans as a result of a failed American Dream.

Works Cited

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