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**A PROJECT OF CONSTRUCTING
A CONTEMPORARY JEWISH IDENTITY
IN RABINOVICI'S NOVEL *SUCHE NACH M***

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Abstract

Attitude to the Nazi past turns to its new phase in the 1980s, after the time of repressing, silent and mourning brings the new discourse in talking about the Holocaust. It was a tendency of "denying" the Holocaust and new anti-semitism movement. In the 90s, Jewish authors confirm their position as 'self-determined agents' in the literary and political area. One of them is Doron Rabinovici, an Austrian Jewish author who wrote the novel *Suche Nach M* in engaging on the project of constructing a contemporary Jewish identity. In this article, the question of how Rabinovici proposes the construction of contemporary Jewish identity will be answered through critical reading on Jewish myth and identity formation theory. The result shows two major strategies that he proposes in his novel: "deconstructs" the Jewish myth (by playing other possibilities to interpret them and unveil the truth) and suggests the self-referential concept (find oneself based on 'the self' instead of immersing self in 'the Other'). These two strategies can be seen as an active engagement with one own traumatic past. It is a historical- and self-awareness approach to construct a problematic contemporary Jewish identity.

Keywords: Myth, Eternal Jews, Golem, Contemporary Jewish Identity

Introduction

Silent, trauma, and taboo are the three most prominent words in describing the attitude towards the Nazi past: not only in German society but also in the Jewish community as the victim of the Nazi. The turning point of the Nazi discourse - specifically in Germany and Austria - comes in the 1980s onward, the time when the ongoing controversies and debates over the legacy of the Nazi era, anti-Semitism, and Jewish identity came to a head. This time is also the crucial time- as, for the first time after Shoah, Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism expressed openly in public (Dagmar, 2008, p. 3). The Waldheim's affair and Haider's Freedom party in Austria that raises the theme xenophobia can be seen as an example of this new tendency of the Nazi and Holocaust discourse. The dynamic of a new spirit of holocaust discussion leads Jewish authors and intellectuals to create their (hi)story to balance the „normalize" past and trivializing of the Holocaust by the revisionists (Dagmar, 2008, p. 3). In summarize, they fight against the new xenophobia and secondary anti-Semitism in two ways: directly by marching and doing a demonstration and indirectly by addressing the political confrontation through their writing (Sharp, 2000, pp.189-192).

In the 1990s, Jewish authors confirm their position as 'self-determined agents' in the literary and political area. They concern in one specific Jewish problem, namely 'Jewish question' by putting the desire in engaging on the project of constructing a contemporary Jewish identity. Thus, the major theme of the young Jewish authors such as Doron Rabinovici, Rafael Seligmann or Robert Schindel is about identity crisis in post-shoah generation (Dagmar, 2008, p.1). Rabinovici explores this theme in his novel *Suche nach M*. The novel revolves around the story of two-second generations of holocaust's survivor in Austria, Dani Morgenthau and Arie Schein. Dani Morgenthau suffers a pathological compulsion to claim the guilt of any criminals, as he covers up his whole body with a bandage and become a "thing" called Mulleman. Meanwhile, Arie Schein flew his unintended crime in Austria to Israel. He also suffers a psychological defect, as he always resembles his target during his work as an Israeli secret service. Immerse actively in Jewish discourse and concern mostly on identity crisis in the second generation of Holocaust survivor. This novel also explores the political and social aspect in Austria-Israel within the global context by using historical-mythological, neurological, psychoanalytical and political narrative. This surreal and complex novel thus shows Rabinovici's engagement - as a historian, essayist, and author- in the political, cultural and social issues, also in the project of constructing a contemporary Jewish identity. In this article, the question of how Robinovici proposes the construction of contemporary Jewish identity will be answered using critical reading on myth and identity formation: that is Jewish myth and his suggestion of the appropriate identity formation for the second generation of Holocaust survivor.

Deconstruction of The Jewish Myth in *Suche Nach M* Rabinovici

As noted above, the major theme of the novel is identity constellation concerning Jewish history. Although the Holocaust is a significant event that brings a big difference and shifting of Jewish discourse, for sure it is not the only historical background that affects Jewish identity formation. It begins two thousand years ago, rooted in Jewish history and mythology. Thus, this becomes the starting point in exploring Rabinovici's proposal.

A myth is often perceived as an old story, not necessarily true but its effect cannot be ignored. Jewish myth that will be explored here is a specific folktale or figure that represents the Jewish guilty that is used in this novel. That is the 'Golem' and 'Ahausser' (the Eternal Jew/Wanderer Jew) who resemble and relate to Mulleman, a crucial and mysterious figure in the novel. In the book „Rebirth of Culture," Cathy S. Gelbin sees Mulleman as Golem, a literary trope inspired by the Cabbalah that in turn took its cues from the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. Gelbin states that in *Suche nach M*, this Golem 'configures the return of guilt that haunts post-war society through the visible sign of the second Jewish generation (Gelbin, 2008, p.22). She does define metaphorical Mullemann as a Golem that represents the return of guilt but does not explore Golem history and his characters that can be used to identify and connect Mulleman with other figures in this novel. This aspect that missed in Cathy's text will be a focus in this article.

There are several versions of Golem history, but one of most prominent text is Rabbi Loew the Maharal of Prague. It tells a story of Golem, a creature made by Rabbi Loew to protect Jews in Prague from anti-Semitism action (Golem in <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Golem>). As Golem grew, it became increasingly violent, killing people and spreading fear. Golem is perceived as a mixed

blessing: heroic yet evil. In Golem's forehead is written "Emet" meaning 'truth.' To defeat Golem, one has to wipe out the E in front of the word Emet to become "Met" that means 'death' (Trachtenberg, 2004, p. 86).

'Emet' or 'truth' is one important point that reveals Golem in Mulleman. Indeed, this is the major task of Mulleman in the novel: to reveal the truth of other people's guilt. The concept of mixed blessing 'evil' and 'heroic' is also played in Mulleman as he at first is perceived as a detrimental figure who causes chaos and horror in Austrian society yet later is praised as a hero, even used as a cultural icon. Rabinovici uses hyperbolic as he describes that Mulleman is not only prised in Austria but also worldwide: he is invited and asked to help other countries to solve their impossible case and as his model appearance is omnipresent, used and copied in many merchandises.

It should be made clear that Mulleman consists of Dani who always confesses the guilt saying 'Ich war es. Ich bin Schuld. Ich habe es getan' (That is me. I am guilty. I have done that) and Golem, a phantom with supernatural power to reveal the truth. In other words, the combination of Dani and Golem creates Mulleman. That is the reason why Mulleman not only confess the crime but also can foresee and depict all crimes from all time (past, present, future) and places (worldwide), something that is just possible to be done by supra-naturalistic power. However, there is something that is ambiguous in Golem dwells in Mulleman. Knowing as a heroic figure for Jews Prague and evil to the gentile, the novel describes another way around: becomes a hero for the Austrian society, yet evil to Dani, the second generation of Holocaust survivor, as it is burying and subduing Dani's personality and identity.

There is also another meaningful way to interpret this Mulleman. To support the exploration in reading him and his connection with other figures in this novel, Mulleman will be examined to the other very identical figure: M, a figure in a film *M* (1931) by Franz Lang, a prominent Austrian Jewish director. M in Franz Lang's film also appears as "mystic" figure gathered in one person. It is a phantom that dominated one person who at the end of the film mourned that he cannot control this phantom. The M is a psychopath and children murder that caused the chaos in Austrian society. In comparing these two identical figures, there is one interesting fact: a compulsive murder in M's Franz Lang is modified in Mulleman's Rabinovici. In Rabinovici's novel, the compulsive murder derived from Golem 'evil' characteristic does not relate to Jewish but to Austrian figure: Kaysser, a gentile with an outstanding manner and lovely father that committed much-hidden crime. Interestingly the 'heroic' part of M's Franz Lang that writes the letter to the newspaper and confesses his crime is directly adopted as Mullemann's character. This 'heroic' attitude is used to reveal Kaysser's crime. According to this it seems that Rabinovici's attempt to play the myth: Golem, a monster that kills gentile is seen in a gentile and lovely father (Kaysser), while the truth/Emet element of Golem is seen in Jewish (Mulleman) who becomes hero, as he unveils Kaysser's misdeed and "helps" Austria to reveal all crime.

The myth-playing is also found in "Ahasuerus," the eternal Jew that also identified as Mulleman. Eternal Jew is the most prominent myth relating to guilty Jews. In the Nazi era, this is even used as the title for a documentary film of anti-Semitic propaganda: 'Der ewige Jude' (Fritz Hippler, 1940). In his novel Rabinovici reveals the centuries covered truth behind this myth. The process of unveiling the truth is drawn in a strong and intense scene and dialogue between Sina, gentile art lecturer, and Navah, a Jewish historian. Navah explains the fact that the eternal Jew is not a Jew, that the figure is merely invented by Christian as anti-

Semitism fable. In so doing, Rabinovici makes all the prejudice of guilty Jews through this eternal Jew's tale unacceptable.

"Ahasver," wiederholte Sina. "Vielleicht, weil er uns mit der Schuld konfrontieren wollte. Mit dieser jüdischen Gestalt der Reue", doch Navah fuhr dazwischen, und gegen ihren Willen brach der ganz persönliche Groll aus ihr hervor. "Wie bitte? Ahasver ist doch keine jüdische der Reue! Die Mär vom Ewigen Juden ist der Fluch vom vaterlandlosen Gesellen, der auf unentwegter Flucht vor seiner Untat ist. Die Figure entsprang der Passion Christi. Ein Schuhmacher, der...wenn ich mich nicht irre...Jesus auf dem Wege nach Golgatha vor seinem Hause nicht ausruhen ließ und nun...wie es heißt...umherwandern muß bis zum letzten Gericht. Ahasver ist keine jüdische Gestalt, werte Frau Mohn, sondern eine christliche Erfindung, die gegen die Juden verwendet wurde. Eine antisemitische Fabel, wenn Sie es genau wissen wollen!" (Suche nach M, pp.206-7)

Sina repeated: " Ahasuerus....Maybe because he wanted to confront us with guilt-through this Jewish figure of atonement" At this point, however, Navah interrupted and, quite unintentionally, all the anchor that had built up inside her spilled out into the open. „What's that? Ahasuerus is hardly a Jewish figure of atonement! The story of the eternal Jew has to do with the curse of the itinerant journeyman who is in constant flight from his crime. The figure originated in Christ's Passion. If I'm not mistaken, it was a shoemaker who did not allow Jesus to rest in front of his house on the way to Calvary and now...as the story goes...has wandered around until the Final Judgment. My dear Mrs.Mohn, Ahasuerus is not a Jewish figure, but rather a Christian invention that has been used against the Jews. An anti-Semitic myth, to be more exact!

After playing with the myth that strongly affects the identity, the next concern is on the identity crisis in the second generation of Holocaust survivor. Here, the constellation of two figures of Holocaust survivor, Dani and Ariele will be drawn.

Self-Referential Concept in Contemporary Jewish Identity

It is evident that along the novel, the tendency of being other and deny one own identity is the central issue. The term 'the self' and 'the Other' are mostly used together in the process of forming an identity. According to this, there is a concept of "Othering," one concept derived from the Hegelian concept "Otherness." In cultural identity discourse, it means "defining and securing one's own positive identity through the stigmatization of another." (Nirmala, 2013, p.1). This concept does not really fit with what I am going to describe the novel, as the novel describes not merely "confirm one identity through the other," but extremely, ignore one own identity by "becoming the other": fully ignoring own identity and adopting others identity. The process of "Becoming other" that appears in this novel can be seen as total assimilation, one of the most debated issues in talking about Jewish identity.

Regarding total assimilation and holocaust, Stratton argues that 'the holocaust and total assimilation are two sides of the same coin, one minted by the nation-state.' It based on the idea that these two processes are mostly determined by 'the Other,' the dominant group in

the nation-state (Stratton, 2000, p.11). Thus the Jewish identity production affected by the Holocaust (and also total assimilation) is something that ambivalent and indeterminate. She highlights the fragility of constructing Jewish identity relate to that:

'For my generation, the Holocaust ended all possibility of thinking that we could be assimilated. It forced the recognition that assimilatory acceptance and tolerance like Othering itself, belong to the dominant, national group. It is theirs, and the state's to offer and to withdraw. This is easy to write, but the experience, the inflection of the Holocaust as part of the production of (a) Jewish identity, has been profoundly more complicated and traumatic. Not least because of the complexity of feeling that has surrounded the event. For Jews, it has been associated with fear, guilt, and shame among many other emotions' (Coming Out Jews, p.10)

The complexity rooted in the traumatic experience and the feeling of fear, guilt, and shame is also highlighted by Rabinovici. Moreover, he also describes that the second generation has to "pay" for something that the previous generation "owe." One other reason why the production of Jewish identity in the second generation becomes ambivalent and fragile under an intertwined process of Holocaust trauma and total assimilation:

'in euch wollen wir überleben, wollen wir uns freikaufen von allen Schuldgefühlen gegenüber den Opfern, und haben auf diese Weise die ganzen Rückstände auf euer Konto, an solchen jungellachs wie Dani und dich überwiesen. Wie in Jeremiah gesagt: " Die Vater haben saure Trauben gegessen, und den Kindern werden davon die Zähne stumpf.' (Suche nach M, p.188)

We wanted to survive in you. We wanted to buy our freedom from our guilt feelings toward the victims and transfer all the debts to your accounts, to those *Jungellachs* like you and Dani. Like it says in Jeremiah" The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth have become tarnished."

Total assimilation presented in this novel is metaphorically exemplified by Arieh and Dani. According to this, Dr. Gratzke argues that these two figures apply the concept of total assimilation in two different ways: while Dani applies it inwardly, Arieh does it outwardly (Gratzke, 2009). Dani applies total inner assimilation, as he is wrapped and isolated below the bandages and confess and drown himself in the denial and uncomfortable crime of others in Austria and worldwide. He immerses himself, his feeling, his thought in the other's deed. In contrast, Arieh applies just "superficial" assimilation through his psychical and mimicry syndrome of the appearance of his target during his duty as an Israeli secret service. It is logically sensible, that total inward assimilation is more problematic than outward since it will abandon and ignore its way of life and way of thinking: culture, history, identity. That is the reason why Dani stands as a symbol of the difficulty in the Jewish identity crisis, while Arieh is placed as a counter-Dani figure: the position that interestingly makes him more important than Dani.

Differs from Dani that is isolated, seemed not aware with his problem and cannot help himself out of the labyrinth, Arieh is successes in solving his disease by his active engagement in searching for an answer of his questions. Arieh also seems to present a real Jew. Described as a smart and talented person in Math and coding problem - the typical

Jewish characteristic - he becomes Israel secret agent and lives in Israel with his Jewish wife. It is also in Arieh's narrative, the essential Jewish oral story tradition, *Haggadah* is presented:

'Ma nischtanah ha lailah haseh mi kol ha leiloth?'
What made this night different from all the other nights?'

This is a question that is asked by Jewish children in the Pessach and will be answered by the father telling them a story about the exodus from Egypt, the trek through the Sinai desert. For many centuries, the story from *Haggadah* reminds the same. It just finds it new version after the Holocaust, where the story becomes the story of a survivor, he survived from the mass murderer (Rabinovici, 2005). What made this night different from all the other nights; the night that Arieh proves his ability to give the racist young man a lesson, and killed him unintendedly. The night that makes Arieh leaves Wien and goes to Israel: to flee from the guilty he never meant and to seek himself he never knew. From this chapter on, Rabinovici begins his complex mythological, neurological, psychoanalytical and political narrative.

These all support my reading in defining Arieh as a critical figure in this novel. As Dani plays his role (collaborate with Golem) in Mullemann and preserves Jewish identity problem with him to be solved, Rabinovici presents the concept of identity forming in the dialogue between Arieh and people around him: his father, Jacob, his wife, Navah or his father's friend Leo Fischer. This leads us to Rabinovici's proposal of Jewish identity forming. In the same way with Stratton, Rabinovici is a pessimist and criticizes the concept of "othering" and total assimilation as he offers self-referential concept: the concept that assesses and forms one identity based on self-awareness, defining one's self by relying on 'the self' and not on 'the Other.'

'wenn du du bist, weil du du bist, und ich ich bin, weil ich ich bin, dann bist du du, und ich bin ich; wenn aber du du bist, weil ich ich bin, und ich ich bin, weil du du bist, dann bist du nicht du, und ich bin nicht ich' (Suche Nach M, p.59, 189)
If you are you because you are you and I am I because I am I, then you are you, and I am I. But if you are you because I am I and I am I because you are you, then you are not you, and I am not I.

This concept also is confirmed as at the end of the novel, Rabinovici once again draws his proposal through Arieh's letter. First of all, Arieh addressed the letter to Dani, prices and emphasized Dani with his identity.

'Morgenthau! Lieber Dani!
Nicht Mullemann will ich Dich nennen, nicht mit Deinem Pseudonym, nicht die Berühmtheit ansprechen; nicht Mullemann, hinter dessen Verband Du Dich verbirgst, in dem Du steckst, mit dem Du in andere schlüpfst, in deren Untat und Verbrechen. Dani bist Du und Morgenthau, mein Freund. (Suche nach M, p. 248)
Dear Dani,
I'm not going to call you Mullemann. I'm not going to call you by your pseudonym. My words are not for that famous man, that Mullemann behind whole bandages you're concealed. They're not for the man whose bandages hide you -the man who is the means of your access to others, to their crimes and misdeeds. You are Dani dan

Morgenthau, my friend.

However, Arie's letter is never sent. In the end, it is Dani's self-awareness - in a way it is reflected through Arie's letter - that Rabinovici tries to write. Finding the way to ease his fear, finding someone who can accept him the way he is, and feels free to be himself. It is through Sina who takes the position that leads Dani to the first stage of self-freedom; to find the way out of the labyrinth and attain a more stable position of creating his Jewish identity. It is by defining himself and doing active engagement with the history: emphasizing *zakhor* (remembering) of his root and history.

'Nicht in den Banden der Zeit eingelegt zu sein wie eine Mumie, allen Techniken der Konservierung eine Absage erteilen, die Schichten abstreifen, die Knoten aufdröseln, ihrer Verknüpfung nachgehen, die Knubbel ertasten, die Riemen umschnüren und ablösen, das ist Erinnerung. Und dann werfen die Mullemänner die Binden ab, rollen sie wieder auf, folgen ihren Bahnen, gehen die Pfade zurück, die sie mit Mull abgesteckt haben und finden aus dem Labyrinth.' (Suche nach M, p.259)

Not to be tied down by the shackles of time like a mummy, to reject all the techniques of preservation, to shed the layers, undo the knots, to go after the knotting together, to feel for the lumps, to unlace and remove the straps: this is the work of memory. Then the Mullemanns of the world throw off the bandages, roll them up again while following where they lead and returning on the paths that they marked out with muslin and find their way out of the labyrinth.

Conclusion

Apart from the complexity of Rabinovici's novel in addressing Jews in Austria within the global context and with his historical-mythological, neurological, psychoanalytical and political narrative, this paper focuses on his engagement on the project of constructing the contemporary Jewish identity. Here two primary strategies are found. Firstly, to "deconstruct" the Jewish myth, by playing the other possibility to interpret them or revealing the veiled truth. Secondly, to suggest the self-referential concept: find one self based on 'the self' instead of immersing self in 'the Other.' These two strategies can be seen as an active engagement with one own past, either in communal level (Jewish mythology) or individual level (self-referential). It is a historical- and self-awareness approach to constructing problematic contemporary Jewish identity.

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