



Jewish Assimilation in America: Female Characters of *Yekl*

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Abstract

In the first part of the twentieth century, the United States of America received a massive influx of immigrant from Eastern Europe, who were mostly Jews and ended up living in the lower east side of New York City. Abraham Cahan is one of the many voices, who wrote about the struggle of newly arrived Jews in America. This article deals with two major female characters, from Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, tumultuous assimilation process in America; and argue *Yekl* provides a sneak peek of the whole process many Jews, especially women, has gone through in America.

Keywords: Jews, assimilation, immigrant, America, identity

1. Introduction

Russian Jews outnumbered all the other influx of immigrants to America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most of this wave of Russian Jews were ended up living in around the Lower East Side of New York City. According to Marilyn Miller and Marian Faux, Russian Jews amounted approximately 2.5 million among 12 million immigrants that arrived in the United States between 1880 and 1910 (101-102). The Lower East Side of New York became a ghetto and sanctuary for all these Jews who were fleeing from the Russian pogroms, political persecution, military conscription and ingrained anti-Semitism. Therefore, the United States of America became "a promised land, a mysterious place of redemption from the accumulated inequalities of the past" (Finkelstein 39) for the Jews. In contrast to other European immigrant groups that came to America to earn money and then going back to Europe, Jews had no intention of returning after earning a decent amount of money. Instead, the lucrative, urban, consumer-based and secular life options in this new-found Jerusalem of America had convinced thousands of Jewish newcomers to "dress like an American, look like an American, and even talk like an American," (Howe 128) which ultimately leads them to become an American.

This desire of assimilating into American society, however, was not as simple as it seemed; and to many of the Jews, the act of assimilation was extremely complicated because of indistinguishability of cultural tradition and religious faith. Chametzky notes that "religion was an important part of the [assimilation] process, and for Jews greatly so since the Jewish religion is so much more a cultural phenomenon than simply a body of doctrine" (24). Judaism, therefore, is not only a religion but also a way of life that influences the way, in general, a Jew lead his or her life. That means, adherence to the Judaic faith is directly reflected by clothing and eating culture as well as leisure activities of a Jew. From this point of view, the desire of becoming an American was more challenging than anticipated for many early Jewish immigrants in the USA as their lifestyle inveterate their Jewish identity more than any other quality. Assimilation, as a result, was extremely tricky for many Jews in the Lower East Side of New York, because of its urban, consumer-

oriented and secular nature. For women, it was more challenging and trickier as many of them were still wearing wigs and were not taking carts during the Sabbath. Which, in general, then led to the very question of compatibility between religious identity and cultural or national identity.

Abraham Cahan is one of the most outspoken and publicly admired writers among many immigrant writers in American history, who wrote about the Jewish struggle of assimilation in America. Throughout his career as a journalist and a writer, Cahan advocated strongly for the idea of assimilation; however, that did not stop him acknowledging the struggle many Jews faced in preserving, discarding, or balancing their religious faith throughout the assimilation process. Similarly, Cahan never failed to criticize America and its too secular and consumer-oriented culture; and how American culture had created a sense of loss within many Jews.

This paper will argue that Abraham Cahan's novella *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* provides a rare look at the tumultuous assimilation process millions of Jews, especially women, faced in America. Therefore, this present paper will analyze two major female characters from the novella in line with the price they pay to become an American.

2. Overview of Jewish American History

It is a mammoth task and out of the scope of this article to give a complete overview of Jewish American history. I will briefly underline a few critical information's of Jewish history in America to put the main plot of *Yekl* in context.

Jews have had a long history of abuse, persecution, prejudice, and discrimination in Europe and the Arab world for centuries. Therefore, the discovery of a new land called America at the later part of the fifteenth century opened up an escape route for Jews who were living a harsh life in Europe and the other part of the world. This new-found land became the mythical Promised Land for the European Jews; however, the Promised Land came with its own way of treating Jews as the majority of the new settlers in America were Christians and came from Europe too. From the very beginnings of Jewish immigration to America, Jews have been faced with an unjustifiable decision: either to convert to another religion or to choose to die and to live in exile or

to choose death (cf. Finkelstein 14, Isaacs 676). This represents only the starting point of age-long prosecution, expulsion, and inquisition of the first group of Jews to come to settle in America, who were Sephardic Jews coming from Spain or Portugal (cf. Finkelstein 28).

The year 1654 is a defining moment in Jewish history in America. According to Finkelstein, Jewish history in the United States of America began with the 23 Jewish refugees arriving in New Amsterdam in that year. Even though they were not the first Jews to reach North America, today they are considered to have altered Jewish history in the US to a remarkable extent. As expected from earlier expulsions, they were not well received in America. The Governor of New Amsterdam, Peter Stuyvesant, worked hard at convincing the newcomers, whom he called a “deceitful race,” (Finkelstein 31) to leave. However, he was not successful, and in April 1655, the first Jewish congregation came into being in North America (cf. Finkelstein 31-33).

The following years showed growth of other congregation and Jewish population in the United States. By the time of the American Revolution, about 2,500 Jews were living in the United States (Finkelstein 35). During the American Revolution, Jewish congregation experienced a period of relaxation until the new Constitution, including the First Amendment of 1791 came into force and promoted (religious) freedom, making the United States the first country in the modern world to grant its Jewish population equal and complete citizenship. Jews now started to have the same rights as other Americans, beginning to feel American themselves as well. America had become a place where they were relatively free of racialism and other discrimination, unlike Jews living in Europe (cf. Finkelstein 49-54). In the Mid-19th-century, Jews began to recollect their roots and brought their traditions to America, assimilating parts of their culture into American life (cf. Finkelstein 60). However, this period of equality did not last long – as the numbers of Jews in America grew and grew, people began to fear that they would outnumber the American population. Besides, stereotypes spread by Christian immigrants led to a new rise of Anti-Semitism (cf. Finkelstein 78-79). As a result, systematic racialism was coming into practice in the US that Jews in America faced restrictions; they were forbidden to work in specific industries, private schools, and other companies. The American Jew was also influenced by events happening in Europe, where the Jewish population had to deal with religious discrimination, were expelled from countries, or only allowed to live in ghettos – facts that triggered even more hatred and stereotypes among Christian immigrants; the Jew became known as the “wanderer among the nations” (Isaacs 676; cf. Finkelstein 85). By the end of the 19th century, another setback occurred in the lives of Russian Jews, namely the rough times of the so-called pogroms, “government-sponsored physical violence” (Finkelstein 88). Naturally, all of those events also had an impact on Jews in America; the times between the 1880s and World War I saw about 2.5 million Jews leaving their oppressive homes in order to live in other countries, above all America (Finkelstein 90).

The 1890s saw the rise of the “Jewish American” novel with the publication of Abraham Cahan’s story *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), telling the story of a Russian-Jewish immigrant in New York (cf. Ruland and Bradbury 234). The essential theme taken up in “Jewish American”

literature was the fact that Jews had been considered to be different throughout history; however, when coming to the New World, they found that America was different, that Jewish immigrants were given new opportunities (cf. Kramer 1). Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), for instance, deals with a diaspora Jew seeing America as the ‘Promised Land,’ trying his luck for a better life in the New World. In this text, Cahan touches on a subject that should become prominent in later works by Jewish American writers, namely of social achievements accompanied by deterioration of morality (cf. Ruland and Bradbury 334).

Abraham Cahan’s popular writing started a new canon in the American literary scene called “Jewish American” fiction. However, between 1880 and 1920, Jewish immigrants came up with numerous different ways of adapting to the American way of life, which created a lot of chaos and confusion in identifying with “Jewish American”. In the middle of the 20th century, a Jew in America had the choice of belonging to the Conservative, Reform, Orthodox, assimilated Jew, or to be what was considered “a good Jew” with American intellect and morals (cf. Wade 1). All those different movements led to a variety of literary works that could or could not be called “Jewish American”. Even the primary known authors, such as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, or Bernard Malamud, defy the term “Jewish American,” seeing themselves as US-Americans who “happen [...] to be Jews” (Codde 6). As discussed in Brauner, Roth once actually stated in an interview about his book *The Plot Against America*: “I do not accept that I write Jewish American fiction. I do not buy that nonsense about black literature or feminist literature. Those are labels made to strengthen some political agenda” (15). To find a comprehensible solution to the debate of which fiction should be considered as “Jewish American” and which not, this article will adhere to Hana Wirth-Nesher’s definition of “Jewish American fiction.”

The importance of “Jewish American” literature for the entire American literary history cannot be denied. The mere number of respectable literary awards given to writers writing about Jewish issues is an indication of the prevalence of Jewish American writing.

3. *Yekl: Jewish Assimilation in America*

Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto tells the story of an Eastern European man and his assimilation into the US. The story starts three years after Jake, the protagonist of the tale, has immigrated to New York from a poor and rural area of Russia. Yekl was his name back then in his home country, but he changed his name into Jake in the process of assimilating and becoming an American. In his attempt of assimilation and becoming as American as possible, Jake has consciously avoided mentioning that he is married and has a wife and a son back at home to his newly acquired friends in New York. He, even, concealed this truth from Mamie, whom Jake is dating and who is more Americanized than he is. Everything was going well for Jake in New York until one day he receives the news of the death of his father back in Russia. Now, he feels obliged to bring his wife and son to America, which has become the turning point for Jake and his existence as a well-assimilated Jewish in America. The arrival of Jake’s wife Gitl and his son has made him realize how alien he is to his orthodox wife as she is to him. Jake and Gitl started drifting slowly apart, both

emotionally and culturally, which leads to their divorce. The novel ends with Jake marrying the more Americanized Mamie and his ex-wife Gitl's likings for the learned immigrant Bernstein whom she would probably marry in future.

Abraham Cahan, although, mostly develops the plotline around Jake and his transformation in American, but it does not fail to admit the changes that happened in the life of his female characters Gitl and Mamie. These two characters have differently represented two strong and culturally induced way of assimilation in the United States of America. Therefore, next sections of this paper will deal with Gitl and Mamie's tumultuous assimilation process in America and will argue that women suffered more than the men in assimilating into the host society, in this case in America.

3.1. Gitl: A 'Greenhorns' Assimilation in America

Abraham Cahan portrays the character of Gitl in such proximity that at the end of the story, Gitl appears to be fully assimilated into America; however, she does not forget the old world and her root. The first time the reader gets an account of Gitl around the middle of the first chapter where Jake remembers "the image of a dark-eyed young woman with a babe in her lap" (Cahan 9). The next time, Cahan describes Gitl when both Jake and Gitl meet at the Immigration Bureau in Ellis Island. On his first sight of Gitl in the big shed at the Immigration Bureau, Jake was disappointed by the attire of Gitl, "his heart had sunk at the sight of his wife's uncouth and un-American appearances. She was slovenly dressed in a brown jacket and skirt of grotesque cut, and her hair was concealed under a voluminous wig of a pitch-black hue" (Cahan 34). In the following paragraphs, readers get a vivid description of Gitl's appearance through Jake's eyes. She seems to be "stouter and shorter," "dark complexion in look," had an "inky little eyes, and above all, the smooth black wig, to lend her resemblance to a squaw" (Cahan 34). This shabby description of her appearance demarcates Gitl from other American and present her as unfit in the new world.

In the other hand, Gitl's arrival has created chaos and extra burden to Jake. To him, she becomes "one great obstacle dropped from heaven, as it were, in [Jake's] way" (Cahan 36). Jake's feeling of the existence of Gitl and his son as dropped from heaven is not coincident; instead, their presence threatens his transformed personality of an assimilated Yankee self. Their presence has confirmed his connection to Jewish religion and ethnic identity that he has been trying to be rid-off since he came to America. Moreover, Gitl and her son represent overwhelmingly the Jewish religious identity, which seems to be an obstacle for Jake in his way of becoming an American and "not be a greenhorn" (5). Because, they are his family and he cannot deny that, which in turn, an essential part of Jewish traditions. Within Judaism and Judaic traditions, family "is considered to be the most important institution for shaping ethnic and religious identity and transmitting Judaism's basic norms and values. It is the institution primarily responsible for Jewish continuity" (Waxman 59). Gitl seems to be following her Jewish identity and wants to keep her Jewish past readily available in her new life in America; whereas, Jake has decided to give up his past and old-world traditions to become an American. Therefore, he changes his name from "Yekl" to "Jake" and calls his wife "Goitie

(Gertie)" (41) instead of Gitl to show his enthusiasm and effort to become an American. This arrival of his family in America, however, has pushed him to recognize the Jewish identity that he has been straining from for the past three years. To him, the presence of his family in the Lower East Side only strengthen his connection to the past that he does not want to reconcile with anymore. This shows Jake's lack of commitment to his family and his adherence to the Jewish religious identity. As a result, only after his father's demise, Jake has felt of a "devout mood" (32) and thought of bringing his wife and son to America. Otherwise, Jake in the past three years, consciously, avoided reconciling the memory of his wife and child. Each time he comes across the memory of his family, "he would consciously let his mind wander off to other topics" (Cahan 24) and would not save enough money to buy tickets for his family to America. In contrast, Gitl was loyal to him and to the old world tradition of taking care of the husband's family and child for the past three years. She waited for him to send tickets for the family to travel to America. Her observation of Jake's appearance after three years of living in two different continents is also starkly different from him.

Gitl, on her part, was overcome with a feeling akin to awe. She, too, could not get herself to realize that this stylish young man – shaved and dressed as in Povodye is only some young nobleman – was Yekl, her own Yekl, who had all these three years never been absent from her mind. (Cahan 36)

However, Gitl has faced the harsh reality of finding a different Yekl once she understands that the 'Yekl' she knows no longer exist in current Jake. Yekl has so changed a person now that only the death of his orthodox father has prompted him with the guilt of not taking care of his family back in Russia. Besides, out of a spasm of guilt and piety precipitated by the death of his father has forced Yekl to bring Gitl and their son to America. "Jake the Yankee" (Cahan 36) does not bring his family to America because of his love for them; instead, he brings them to America because of his feeling of guilt. This feeling of guilt appeared so strong in Jake that he prayed for the first time in three years on the night he got the news of his father's death. That Jake's overtly Jewish act of praying for his father and borrowing money to buy tickets for Gitl to America shows her affiliation to Jewish religion and culture in the mind of Jake.

With this bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn by his side! That she was his wife, nay, that he was a married man at all, seemed incredible to him. The sturdy, thriving urchin had at first inspired him with pride; but as he now cast another side glance at Gitl's wig he lost all interest in him [Yosselé]. (36)

Gitl's struggle to cope with the new environment intensified by Jake's, now and then, harsh voice and cold look on her. She thought, "He must hate me! A pain upon me" (Cahan 42) and decided to take off her wig and the kerchief to impress him. This act of Gitl shows her willingness to change for love and not in the intention of assimilating to America. Gitl's priority of lover over assimilation is precisely the opposite of Jake's stance on assimilation. However, within a moment after her thought of giving up the wig, Gitl again change her mind in the fear "that God would be sure to punish her for the terrible sin, so that instead of winning Jake's love the change would increase his hatred for her." (42) This change of mind shows Gitl's

adherence to Jewish religious identity and tradition, which Jake has been working hard to get rid of. While Gitl is trying to regain her love, Jake was disgusted by the idea that his ability to disassociate himself from his Jewish identity is in jeopardy, and he fears that Gitl's greenhorn persona will also level him as a sturdy greenhorn living in America. Through Jake and Gitl's oppositional view on Jewish identity, Cahan is showing the difficulty immigrants face in defining their new identity and getting away from an established identity. It, also, shows that one cannot dispense identity as comfortably as Jake has given up his Jewish name and habits. Although, Jake has adopted into Yankee style of speaking, clothing and going to dancing clubs in the evening; however, he cannot attain the status of an American man since he is still very much married to his Jewish identity through his marriage to Gitl. On the other hand, slowly but consciously Gitl begins to realize the importance of assimilation and adopting into the new way of life in America; but, she does not totally give up her Jewish identity. She, instead, shows her admiration and believe in her former Jewish identity along with her assertion to become Americanized without giving up the past.

Jake and Gitl represent two different notions of assimilation. Both of them are for assimilation, but one keeps attachment to the European identity and another not. In addition, by juxtaposing these two views, Cahan has pointed out the dilemma immigrants' face in choosing the right way to become an American. In the meantime, Gitl's affection and likings for Mr Bernstein, a colleague and flatmate of Jake, shows that the new environment will change everyone no matter one wants it or not. Gitl has found Mr Bernstein attractive because he has a "superior education" (Cahan 48) than her husband, still follows the Jewish religious tradition, and keep his attachment to the European identity too. Through Jake's deteriorating relationship with Gitl and Gitl's affection and apparent future marriage with Bernstein, Cahan illustrates a reliable picture of a clash between new and old traditions.

Finally, Gitl is perceiving all the old world religious norms and still keeping up with the American lifestyle has proved that one does not have to give up the past to be assimilated into a new society. Although, Gitl has gone through mental and psychological mayhem, a brutal divorce and danger of being alone in a new place; but, in the end, she became a champion in assimilating into the new world.

3.2 Mamie: Jake's Ideal American Wife

Jake has an intense fascination and attraction towards Mamie, a Polish girl, who has wholly assimilated into America, talks, and dresses almost like a Yankee New York woman. Cahan represents Mamie as the female figure of Jake and a total opposite of Gitl. She assimilates into the American way of lifestyle, regularly goes to a dancing club, and saves a respectable amount of money for her future. Jake met Mamie in the dance club where she appeared to be the "girl with a superabundance of pitch-black side bangs and with a pert, ill-natured, pretty face of the most strikingly Semitic cast in the whole gathering. She looked twenty-three or more, was inclined to plumpness, and her shrewd deep dark eyes gleamed out of a warm gipsy complexion" (Cahan 19).

One of the signature styles of Abraham Cahan's writing is of an acute and detailed description of his characters, and in the case of Mamie, there is no different too. During her first

meeting and encounter with Gitl, Mamie appeared as [...] dressed for some occasion of state, for she was powdered and straight-laced and resplendent in a waist of blazing red, gaudily trimmed, and with puff sleeves, each wider than the vast expanse of white straw, surmounted with a whole forest of ostrich feathers, which adorned her head. One of her gloved hands held the huge hoop-shaped yellowish handle of a blue parasol. (Cahan 48-49)

These sentences have a highly theatrical flavour in it, and it contrasted between the two antagonistic female characters and the analogous culture they represent as well as their culturally-induced definitions of femininity. Mamie's outfit shows how much Americanized she is than any other immigrants' from Eastern Europe and how far she has come to denounce her Polish Jewish identity. Her true assimilated self, thus, put her in a better place to control Jake than Gitl. In her first with Mamie, Gitl understand that "[Jake and Mamie] were having a heated altercation, and that Jake was begging about something or other, and was generally the underdog in the parley" (Cahan 51). This shows Mamie's control over Jake. Besides, it also proves the fact that Mamie is now an independent woman in America, and enjoy American freedom; in contrast, Gitl still has not come out from the Jewish tradition of being a homemaker only. Therefore, Gitl and Mamie represent the bipolar position of traditionalism and Americanization, which, in a way, also represents Jake's internal split between his Jewish identity and desire of becoming an American.

Mamie's assimilation, however, does not come easily too; and she has worked hard to come this far. Mamie has been working as "a shirtmaker" (Cahan 63) and living with an elderly woman to save enough money so that she can marry a decent American man. Abraham Cahan has not provided a detailed description of Mamie's past and portrays her more negative ways than Gitl through her weighty American persona. Cahan presents Mamie as an infectious and maddening drug in Jake's consciousness; Jake [...] felt as if Mamie had breathed a sweet poison into his veins, which was now taking effect, spreading a devouring fire through his soul, and kindling him with a frantic thirst for more of the same virus. His features became distended, as it were, and acquired a feverish effect. (Cahan 60)

This further speaks of Mamie's persona as artificial and poisonous comparing to Gitl's natural and naïve personality. It also establishes, in fact, Mamie as a representative of America and Americanization that Jake has been longing for. Jake, therefore, sees marrying Mamie as his only option to be an American; instead of, him gradually learning actions and values identified with American.

At the end of the story, however, we find Jake regretting his rash action of marrying Mamie. He realizes the fact, although, by marrying Mamie, he ultimately get rid of his Jewish identity, it does not attain him the status of an American one. This deconstructs the idea of a single identity in a rapidly urbanized and secular society like the Lower East Side of New York. Jake is victorious, in a sense, as he divorces Gitl and cuts off all ties of his past; but he appears to be defeated too and becomes a "victim of an ignominious defeat" (Cahan 89).

4. Conclusion: An Assimilated Gitl

In the end, readers see a new Gitl, who is now well-informed and cautiously approaching to assimilate into the US. By contrasting Jake's ending in "defeat" at the divorce

settlement with Gitl, Abraham Cahan brings the pitfalls of assimilation into the light of general consideration. Furthermore, Cahan portrays Gitl as someone who does not try to secularize or self-consciously Americanize herself; instead, her only rash attempt to make herself an American, such as the awkward attempt at cutting her hair and changing her clothes, came at a time while she was trying to please Jake. Part of Gitl's new-found confidence also comes from her joining of Bernstein and their joint planning of opening a "grocery business... with the money paid to her by Jake" (Cahan 89) for the divorce.

The story ends with two pairs, Jake and Mamie, find each other embracing their well-awaited desire of being American; while the traditionalist couple, Gitl and Bernstein, get an opportunity to preserve as much of their cultural and religious heritage as they wish. The assimilation of the inassimilable Gitl to the American way of life, wherein she is starting to feel comfortable, is especially striking. Additionally, one of the many crucial things going to take place in Gitl's life is that she is heading toward becoming an independent and self-confident businessperson, a role that will ultimately lift her from her former insecurity and compliance vis-à-vis men and tradition. Additionally, having, in a way, outflanked Mamie and Jake's lawyer, Gitl shows her further advancement towards a world and society, which is overwhelmingly capitalistic and consumer-oriented. On the other hand, Mamie will continue to pursue her ability to act American, and her apparent financial freedom and control over Jake.

Finally, in the long run, traditions and conventions will be changed, challenged, modified and undermined by the actual demand of the time in a new and liberal environment. Gitl and Bernstein, now and then, maybe of more cautious of their past, traditions, and cultural background they are from than Mamie and Jake, but it is clear that their life shapes here and now; and they are a part of a process that they accept or do not accept will transform everything around them that they cannot escape.

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