

SECULAR AND ORTHODOX: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL READING OF CHAIM POTOK'S MY NAME IS ASHER LEV

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ABSTRACT

Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* focuses on a clash between the secular and the Orthodox Jewish culture. The structural framework of core clash now is extended to a bitter clash between Hasidic Jewish culture and Western art and a clash between father and son. Asher Lev introduces himself to the reader as a painter mired in controversy as an observant Jew and an artist. Asher experiences the existential depression all through his life. Because of his passion in art the people around him feels that he had brought disgrace to their Jewish identity. This research paper attempts to trace the conflict between the secular and orthodox Jewish community through psychoanalytical perspective.

Keywords: Disgrace, Conflict, Identity, Secular, Orthodox.

One of the major themes of *My Name is Asher Lev* is the conflict between orthodox Jewish values and the secular artistic drive. As Stemlicht observes:

Asher Lev encapsulates the difficulties faced by many observant Jews. They are torn between the values, the rhythms of secular American life and their desire to adhere to the key tenets of their faith including keeping the Ten Commandments, regular attendance at synagogue and obeying Talmudic law as it informs daily life. For the Ultra-orthodox it is harder, especially when aspects

of their occupations conflict with traditional selves. Asher's case is more dramatic than most, although his solution is more radical than most. Compelled by his artistic drive he employs a central image in Christian art. the Crucifixion, ostensibly because it is a western symbol of human suffering and because there is no equivalent for that degree of martyrdom available in Jewish tradition. (82)

The word 'Conflict' is generally a part of human interaction with individual preference and differentiations in ideologies. Conflicts arises in multiple levels: behavioral, emotional or perceptive dimensions resulting in segregation, discrimination and exclusion. Conflict happens when one tries to oppose, or resist the will of another or others. But as a social process it seeks to obtain power, freedom or space by weakening the competitors and directly challenges the antagonist by violence or threat of violence. Individual differences, cultural variance, clash of interests and social change can be some of causes of conflict. According to Colman "A conflict is the anticipated frustration entailed in the choice of either alternative." (73)

Asher as a child was endowed with a gift, the gift of drawing. His father was pious, reading Talmud on Shabbos. Asher's mother hailed from a very pious Jewish background and came from the family of Sadegerar Hasidim. Asher's father expressed his dissatisfaction over Asher spending a lot of time on drawing. The displeasure and reprimand of his father affected the sensitive child so much that he dreamt he saw his great forefather rushing towards him through the forest. He stormed into the room and said that he was wasting time drawing. But Asher's father's brother Yitzchok motivated Asher and compared him to Chagall a famous Jewish painter and offered to buy one of Asher's paintings and he really did buy one and paid for it. But his father came into the room, replaced the drawing and took the money, for he never encouraged his son's efforts at drawing.

The conflict between the father's ideology and son's passion towards art forms the central idea in the novel. In Erikson's theory of Psycho-social development, conflict is a major issue which contributes or serves as a turning point in the individual's development. The third stage of development which a child experience is "Initiative vs Guilt". Asher in this stage of development choose to initiate his power in art but his father tries to prove him that art is against Jewish custom. Asher is successful in his perception and doesn't fail to assert his power. This makes him not as a failure ending up in guilt, mistrust and self-doubt.

Asher entered Ladover yeshiva, a school of Jewish learning as a student. Though the students never met the Rebbe they saw a great deal of the mashpia, the teacher who was in charge of the spiritual development of the students. It was his duty to teach the children the doctrines of Ladover Hasidism. Asher's father spent much of his time travelling for the Rebbe. He travelled to many places in America like Philadelphia, Newark, Boston and Washington. When news reached Asher's father that certain Jewish writers were shot and killed in Hissia, he was highly disturbed. While his fellow men were being killed, he was ready to risk his life for them thereby continuing his father's mission who also worked as an emissary for the Rebbe. The social conflict against the Jews are also highlighted in the novel.

Within a short time, news was broadcast that nine doctors were arrested by Soviet police for plotting to murder leaders in the Hissian army and navy. Of the nine six were Jews. Out of shock and anguish Asher's father cried to God, Ribbono Shel Olom. At school, children had a special assembly, and the mashpia, Rav Yosef Cutler addressed them about how six Jewish doctors had been arrested. He states, for hundreds of years Jews have suffered from the murderous hatred of the Hissians, first under the Czars and now under the

Bolsheviks. The Hissian government is different but the Hissian hatred of the Jew is the same (MNAL 67).

The novel portrays poignant scenes of Jewish suffering in Hissia. The novel describes the cruel treatment meted out to Jews in Hissia at the hands of Stalin. Reb Yudel Krinsky lived in Hissia and he was sent to Siberia for eleven years. Unfortunately, he had lost his wife and children in the war. But he had survived the harsh climate of Siberia and was brought to America by the efforts of Asher's father. The novel also documents the merciless killing of writers by the Soviet Union. Asher's father was upset and disturbed by the untimely death of the Jewish writers and he remarked. "They kill people the way people kill mosquitoes. What kind of human kills another human being that way?" (MNAL 58). These instances reveal the element of suffering in the novel and the discrimination practiced against Jews.

Psychologists believe that artistic self-expression improve people's conflict and problem resolution skills, and develops good interpersonal skills, manage and regulate behavior, reduce anxiety and stress, boost self-esteem, and develop self-awareness. For Asher art is the expression of controlling his mental conflict but at the same time it contributes to the conflict in the relationship with his father. Asher made an exquisite painting of his mother and for the first time his father appreciated Asher's drawing of his mother and remarked that Asher possessed a gift. But he was not sure whether it was a gift from the Master of the Universe or from the other Side. Asher's father was deeply convinced that Jews in Europe were starving for Torah. It was for this purpose that the Rebbe was sending Asher's father to Europe to build centers for Torah. In the eyes of the Master of the Universe this was of great importance-to protect Jewish lives. But Asher reflected to his mother that something within him could not bear the thought of leaving this place and going to Vienna.

The novelist Chaim Potok makes Asher's father as his representative in bringing out the Jewish identity and tradition. The early tzaddikim were people who used to travel and they were the disciples of Baal Shem Tov. Asher's grandfather was a great Jewish scholar and an emissary from the Rebbe was resident at Asher's grandfather's house. They studied together and later Asher's grandfather moved to Lador and became an emissary of the Rebbe's father. They were making serious plans for the propagation of Torah in Hissia.

Asher's grandfather was to travel and set up underground yeshivas and one day while returning home he was murdered by a drunken peasant the night before Easter. Sensing danger and insecurity the Rebbe's father along with Asher's father, his mother and brother left their place and came to America. Something had been left unfinished in the world, so the Rebbe and Asher's father wanted to complete the unfulfilled mission. This narration gives Asher and the reader the reasons for Asher's father's continuous travel. It is a justification of Asher's father's purpose in life which will be contrasted with that of Asher's later life. Asher expressed his anger on the Rebbe through drawing his face in the printed page of his Chumash. When the teacher noticed he looked into the Chumash and realized he had drawn the Rebbe with a horrible face and a threatening look. It was an unconscious effort as it was the Rebbe who decided that his father was to go to Vienna for, he had made him look like a figure from the Other Side. Soon enough the mash pia called to inform Asher's mother of what Asher had done in school and he asked Asher to come to his office the next morning.

Asher's father was much disturbed that the mashpia had called him and told him about Asher for he felt ten-year-old boys should be more responsible. Asher had to meet the mashpia that day and his father asked him to apologize. The Jewish community was so close and tightly knit that any misbehavior was immediately reported to the higher Jewish authority which censured any misconduct. He broke out in anger against his son. For the first time in the novel

the author makes his protagonist question Jewish authority, when Asher retorts by asking his father not to call drawing ‘foolishness’. Unable to express his anger and his anxiety over Asher’s uncommon conduct he remarked, if you were a genius in mathematics, I would understand. If you were a genius in writing, I would also understand. If you were a genius in Gemorra, I would certainly understand. But a genius in drawing is foolishness, and I will not let it interfere with our lives. (MNAL 141)

Asher’s father, Aryeh being brought up in a rigid orthodox Jewish background which dictated reverence for the Torah, failed to understand his son’s innermost need. After the lapse of a few days his mother explained that the Rebbe had given three choices to Asher’s father. He could remain in America and continue his work or he could go to Europe with this mother, leaving Asher in Uncle Yitzchok’s house or he could go alone leaving Asher and his mother in America. The Rebbe and other Jewish authorities had decided that Asher could not go to Vienna. The idea of leaving Asher in his uncle’s house also was not feasible. In a few days Asher’s father bid good-bye to his family and left for Vienna. Aryeh Lev, Asher’s father, regularly corresponded with his family. He travelled to various places in Europe like Zurich, Geneva, Pairs and Bucharest. The work was difficult but he had thirst in Ribbono Shel Olom. Ellen Serlen Uffen remarks that Asher’s father, “like his father before him travels throughout Europe and America for the Rebbe opening yeshivas and working to free Hissian Jews in the years following Stalin’s death ... he is a hero to the Ladover Hasidim, who see him as single-handedly responsible for reviving European Judaism” (175)

Asher realized his father’s presence only after he had left. He now began to miss his father more on Shabbos afternoons and he began to recollect and remember his father from the time he was a boy and began to make drawings. He drew his father talking with his mother on the parkway beach, and climbing to the top of their apartment taking his son with him. Asher’s

mother confessed that she missed Asher's father very much but consoled herself that he was travelling for the Rebbe. After his father left, Asher began to draw very often. Even while he walked or sat in class his mind was on drawing. As Ellen Serlen Uffen remarks:

(Asher) Lev's mother is no less zealous in her pursuit of what she sees as her personal duty ... her special dilemma ... is her understanding of the needs of both her husband and son and her sympathy with both ... she senses, as her husband does not, the importance of Asher's drawing to him. (175)

Asher received a gift from his mother and it was a box of oil colors, brushes, turpentine and other materials. She also bought an easel and some canvases from Yudel Krinsky's store. He began using oil colors and his first painting was his mother looking out of the window from their living room. The teachers in the school and the neighbors advised Asher to learn Torah and not to concentrate too much on paintings. In Museum Asher's mother turned against the nude portrayal of women as she insisted that Torah Jews don't draw and paint. She was also displeased with her son drawing Jesus as the Jews believe Jesus to be responsible for much Jewish blood being spilt. Religious extremists contribute to conflict escalation. They see radical measures as necessary to fulfilling God's wishes. The hatred against Jesus is also reflected in the novel.

When Asher's father returned from Europe to celebrate Pesach, Asher's mother related about the oil color sets and his visits to the museum. He had looked into the sketchbook filled with drawings of Jesus and nudes with revulsion for he had devoted about six months creating yeshivas and teaching Torah and Hasidus. Now on returning home he felt his house desecrated and he was in an uncontrollable rage. Asher's drawing of Jesus had aroused his intolerance and unreasonable anger towards his son. He referred to Jesus as "that man" (TGAL 176). He would not pronounce the name. He said that much Jewish blood had been spilled because of him.

Many Jews were killed during the Chisades. Since the world believed that the Jews killed Jesus, Hitler found no great difficulty in killing six million Jews. Asher's grandfather was murdered by a Hissian peasant because he was drunk before Easter, a festival commemorating that man. He also strongly objected to the drawing of nude women because the body was the gift of Ribbono Shel Olom and the Torah forbade the Jews to treat it without modesty.

Asher's father began to shout and fight with his mother. It became a regular feature. One night when his father was not at home Asher inquired why his father shouted at her and his mother replied that he was upset. He had given her the responsibility of bringing him up, but when he saw Asher's paintings and low marks, he became very upset. She had presented Asher with a set of oil colors to encourage him to study harder. He thought his wife was encouraging his foolishness. The next morning when Asher unwittingly began to draw on the dining table with his fork, his father's uncontrollable anger was aroused and his father's fingers clenched around his wrist till he was writhing in pain. He began to cry but his parents were shouting at each other. His father's finger marks were evident on his wrist and in his anger, he raged that he would not bring up such a son.

Asher began to beg his father that he could not help but draw. His father ordered him to fight it because he was bringing drawings of that man and drawings of naked women, for he feared he would become a goy. Potok highlights the conservative and narrow-minded Jews' hatred for art, intolerance of western culture and Christianity. This brings up the fundamental conflict in the novel between Jewish Orthodoxy and art. His father moreover asserted that he was working hard for Ribbono Shel Olom. "I am killing myself for Ribbono She! Olom. I have broken my family for Ribbono She! Olom" (TGAL 176).

Asher disliked the fact that his father was shouting at his mother. Again, and again Asher overheard his parents quarrelling in their bedroom at night and it disturbed him very

much. Asher holds bitter memories of that Passover because all his childhood he had loved that festival. Now it was choked with bitterness and fear. "... The small kitchen echoed his anger" (MNAL 180). Before Asher's father left, there was a heated argument which once again disturbed him. After his father left for his work to other countries, Asher began to study Talmud and Bible. He applied himself to his studies and books but on the other hand he was also drawing and painting. He visited the museum and copied paintings. His mother was happy at his progress in studies and his teacher also appreciated him.

Throughout the novel the novelist Chaim Pataк exposes the contrasting attitudes towards painting and also brings out the conflict in the protagonist's mind. When Asher Lev responded to a question on responsibility that he was responsible to the Jews, Jacob Kahn angrily retorted that as an artist he was responsible only to his art. If he wanted to be a painter, he must learn to use line, colour, shape and texture. These ideas he began to learn that very afternoon. He also stressed that painting was not storytelling. The novelist now initiates his chief character who is a novice into the world of art. The world of art and the world of Judaism are pitted against each other.

Works Cited

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