Chapter VI

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All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.

—Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels (12)

It seems appropriate now, while drawing a conclusion, to go back to the question posited at the very beginning of the thesis: what aspects of the Jewish diaspora in the American melting pot are revived in the postwar Jewish-American consciousness? While a flaw appears in the melting pot ideal preventing it from delving deeply into the Jewish-American psyche, the hyphen never departs its place graphically, socially and psychologically. The American Jew succeeds in overcoming his economic marginality, but he fails to grasp that success as real. As a result he/she remains confined to the consciousness of his/her diasporic fears and anxieties. Neither their prosperity in America nor the emergence of the State of Israel can essentially alter or transform the American Jews’ hyphenated identity. For, hyphenation, in this case, goes beyond the mere struggle for social justice and equality to submerged layers of anxiety inherited in the features of the For-itself being. This, according to Sartre, is a consciousness that needs to establish itself as distinct from the world to which it continues to be Other. The For-itself then is diasporic in the sense that it is an
image of the self that has its genesis in history but that comprises the uncertainty of
the present moment and the unrealised potentials that lie far in the future.
Subsequently, sharing the common life in diasporic countries entails, in Bellow’s
words, becoming prone to “the desperate sense of non-being-in-being—to experience
the gaping hole at the center of the self” (“A Jewish Writer in America-II” 6). Bellow
and other postwar Jewish-American writers are aware of that void at the centre of the
self, so they find it compulsive to present their own imaginative versions of it in their
fiction.

Diasporic Angst, in this sense, is the Angst of identity assuming several
problematic forms. Kierkegaard classically distinguishes Angst from fear on the
grounds that Angst has no specific object. In fact, there can hardly be a stark example
of objectless concern than a state in which people are thrown into strangeness where
annihilation is likely to befall at any moment and from everywhere. This anxiety over
one’s own fate, however, develops from mere feelings to a lived condition.
Consequently, even if they enjoy the mainstream privileges with no peril around as it
is the case in America, Jews hardly let their guard down. They think of themselves as
victims of a lingering history of persecution. Obviously, what the melting pot ideal
can never erase are the diasporic hangovers kept alive in the Jewish-American
consciousness. Hence, it is not the traditional allegiances to a centre that characterises
the people’s diasporic sensibility. It is rather the sense of entrapment in the
entanglement of the hyphen which acquires new meanings in accordance with the
particularity of the Jewish existence in the post-Holocaust world. “Diaspora
membership,” comments William Safran, “is a matter both of status and identity, and
identity is relational, contextual, and time-bound. In many cases, moreover,
individual notions of diaspora and homeland are figurative” (12). Understood in this sense, the figurative nature of a Jew’s relationship with the hyphen that begets most of the diasporic anxieties is represented in the novels already discussed in the four preceding chapters.

Obviously, the entire body of the text analysed here encompasses various but relevant faces of the response to dwelling-in-displacement. The writers, quite aware of the original loss, project that consciousness on two discursive themes: an encounter with what they figure out as an unhomely world; and a series of figurative dislocations and dispossessions. These experiences, however, are dramatised largely in the protagonists’ consciousness as they struggle to understand their own essence. This is not to say that what is seen as homelessness takes place entirely in the characters’ anxious imagination. Nor does having homes mean that the Jewish protagonists feel at home in their own homes. It is rather a complexity of living through the burdens of a history of displacement assuming variable shapes (real and imagined). Those who have homes such as Leventhal, Herzog, Berman, and Nazerman do not stop wandering in search of the accommodating domesticity their American houses are lacking. Sammler, Lesser, and Bok do not own houses, so they are more prone to the anxiety of homelessness. Both categories, however, contemplate the transient nature of their dwelling. Furthermore, they feel alienated and embittered as the personal versions of the American dreams they have toiled to attain get shattered due to encounters with external adversities and internal weaknesses alike. But the lack of security, the sense of alienation, and the overwhelming feelings of unhomeliness are, to a large extent, caused by the protagonists’ ambivalence and beleaguered worldview. This is why their compulsive
journey towards detachment always reaches an impasse. These, in brief, are some aspects of the anxiety of displacement that the Second Chapter of this study elucidates.

Both the themes of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust that culminate in a history of displacement have been examined in the Third Chapter. What is distinct about the postwar Jewish-American fiction is that the focus of its concern goes beyond the mere recording of the historical events or direct encounters to reenacting them through a number of figurative tropes. This technique, while befitting the depiction of the anxieties of persecution rather than persecution itself, articulates the gap of time and space separating the American (almost aesthetic) experience from the European one. Hence, in addition to the realistic atrocities of anti-Semitic persecution, the novels invoke certain metaphorical representations as the writers own contribution to the themes. The Holocaust is brought forth through a number of iconic messages: images associated with the tragedy such as rats, trains, chimneys, and even characters having pejorative Nazi traits. Nazism as a nihilistic ideology is deconstructed in Herzog and Mr. Sammler’s Planet by way of attacking the Romantic and Faustian philosophies on which it is grounded. While the Nazi traits appear in such antagonists as Valentine, Albee, Grubeshov, etc., the atrocities of situations similar to gas chambers are experienced by both Leventhal and Morris Bober. Entrapment is also portrayed naturalistically in the claustrophobic elements of environment that, one way or the other, appears hostile and suffocating to the protagonists. Apparently, the entire flux of vulnerability to history is internalised by the Jewish-American consciousness which no longer can see beyond the abyss of
annihilation. Accordingly, the mind that feels besieged by people, nature and symbols is likely to fall victim to its own fears that, in turn, lead to psychological ailments.

The Fourth Chapter shifts to anxiety that is psychological in nature and that comes as a developed complication of the ones discussed earlier. A number of factors shape the character’s life and give way to psychological disintegration. The fear of acculturation, the sensitivity to environmental hazards, the absent presence of the Holocaust, and the exaggerated reaction to anti-Semitism trigger certain neurotic disorders. The writers are familiar with the pressures driving the Jewish psyche to the borders—sometimes out—of sanity. “I have often thought,” notes Saul Bellow, “that it would be something of a miracle if they [Jews] had not been driven mad by their experiences in the century” (“A Jewish Writer in America-II” 2). As a result of this understanding, the writers incorporate symptoms of traumatic disorders and delusions caused mainly by the anxiety over an exaggerated sense of danger. Trauma in the postwar Jewish-American context, however, is not restricted to the direct victims of catastrophic incidents. The trauma of historical events can affect even those who think of themselves as potential victims. Consequently, fragments of an unknown past intrude the characters’ present in the form of hallucination, nightmares like the ones starkly experienced by Nazerman and Yakov Bok. But that collective beleaguered response gives way to paranoid delusions of persecution that mark a severe dichotomy between reality and the characters’ perception of it. Such psychological crises, originating in the bewilderment of insecurity, the fears of persecution and collective trauma, determine the characters’ entangled relationship with the world that causes them to dwell in the fantastic and detached world of memory.
Broadly speaking, diasporic narratives represent a conscious effort to articulate the cultural heritage, ethnic grievances and even the lost faces and scenes through the acts of personal and collective memory. In the postwar Jewish-American context, memory acts as a stimulus that connects the Jews of the New World to the horror of the Old World and keeps their bond with the past maintained altering in the process the temporality of history. Commenting on the grand position the past occupies in the diasporic present, Clifford observes, “Linear history is broken, the present constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired, but obstructed future: a renewed, painful yearning” (“Diaspora” 318). Hence, while the fragments of the personal memory reconstruct the ultimate image of the past as a collective identity, the gloomy familial atmospheres where the writers grow are reproduced by postmemory as an imaginative shaping force. These various aspects of retrieving the past as a collective identity have been brought into focus in the Fifth Chapter where Bellow, Malamud and Wallant posit memory employing technical and thematic means. Technically, the stream of consciousness, the juxtaposition of scenes from the past with others from the present and the frequent use of dreams set memory working. Thematically, the prevailing presence of death, the separatist detachment from society and shunning of its values, and skepticism are all spaces where the past is nurtured. These altogether elicit denouncing reality the act that leads to accepting memory as an optional exile. Understood this way, memory in the postwar Jewish-American fiction, while responding to an in-group sensibility, becomes a way by which the diasporic consciousness gets revived and maintained. As long as the last shreds of the people’s memory of the past are held on, diaspora is still present to greater or lesser degrees.
Phenomenologically speaking, the postwar Jewish-American fiction records a Jew’s diasporic experiences in terms of Husserl’s intentionality. The intentional experiences are the combination of what the objects surrounding the characters really are and how they appear to their consciousness based on memory and worldview. In this way, the phenomenological method has been indispensable for examining such a type of experience. It does not give much credit to the real extrinsic existence of an object as long as it emerges in consciousness. Hence, highlighting the world of diaspora not as it is but as it appears in the Jewish-American consciousness has been the main argument of this study. Defining the phenomenological method, Eagleton observes, “objects can be regarded not as things in themselves but as things posited, or ‘intended’, by consciousness” (48). What matters, then, is not the physicality of the diasporic phenomena surrounding an American Jew, but the act of experiencing them. It is, however, in reflection that the real and concealed meanings of the experienced phenomena get revealed. But that revelation cannot occur in isolation from the mechanism of memory which adds its own colours and shape. An act or an utterance can be interpreted as anti-Semitic or not in accordance to that mechanism in which understanding the world keeps shifting whenever looked at from a different angle or mood.

Arguably, the postwar Jewish-American novel moves the representation of diaspora form the external socio-political realms to the internal psycho-existential complexities felt in the characters’ consciousness. This causes the diasporic ailments to depart from their places in the real world determined by politics and human relations only to enter the aesthetic zone of simulation. The original diasporic problems are reproduced as metaphors of displacement, intimations of besiegement,
delusions of persecutions, and retrieving, nurturing, and recreating the past. These are exactly what have been explored in the preceding chapters as anxieties residing in the diasporic consciousness and coming under the broader trope of Angst. Diasporic Angst, accordingly, invokes the feelings of not coming to terms with the host land because it does not offer the prerequisites of a homely stay and does not match the idealistic image of home as well. For American Jews, the entire diasporic question is reduced to a dubious adjustment to a host land whose hospitality is believed to be elusive and unreliable. This is why even the Jewish-American writers’ concerns with the above-mentioned question hardly go beyond the hidden encounters imbibed with anxieties along with outspoken hints. This case, however, can never be understood in isolation from the real ideological and social tensions underlying the entire fictional world.

Regardless of how liberal and humanist the Jewish-American writer is, he/she can never tolerate to be the object of an absolute process of acculturation. Ethnic anxieties necessarily surface since to lose one’s roots or to stand in-between entails losing an authentic being. Hyphen is a trope of that in-betweenness which can never be an effective alternative for ethnic identity. Even a liberal writer as Saul Bellow finds it difficult to overcome that anxiety. Although he defines himself as “an American writer and a Jew,” Bellow feels obliged to assert: “But I am not an assimilationist.” “I am a Jew,” he maintains,

and as such I am made to understand by Jewish history that I cannot absolutely count on enlightened laws and institutions [of America] to protect me and my descendants. I observe the Jewish present closely and actively remember the Jewish past—not only its often heroic
suffering but also the high significance of the meaning of the Jewish history. (“A Jewish Writer in America-II” 6)

This consciousness is projected on the characters’ disillusionment about their liberal and skeptic thinking. They start introducing themselves to the world as secular in hope that may add to their credit but end up as “others.” The distance of otherness, therefore, is maintained by Jews too. They cultivate the presence of the other as an important means for the continued definition of the self that derives its essence from the limits its Other imposes. This gives a clue to the lingering sense of besiegement dominating the Jewish-American consciousness.

The sense of embattledness is then a distinct and determinant feature that governs the American Jews’ viewing of the world as it often colours their perception of reality. In “The Ideology of Affliction,” Bernard Susser writes: “This persistent sense of being vulnerable and defenseless is one factor behind many of the well-known paradoxes of American Jewish life” (224). Living with a deep sense of anxiety and dread becomes one way of adherence to the conviction that exile is permanent and reconciliation with it is undependable, baseless and illusory. This is why almost all the Jewish protagonists in the novels examined above are paranoid in their approach to life out of their ghetto-like neighbourhood and in their response to the gentiles’ words and actions. To live on after the Holocaust entails, for them, to utilise a number of survival strategies which all meet the necessity of constructing adversity that would keep their wakefulness alive. This adversity-centred worldview originates in internalising anti-Semitism that, having its starting point in Esau’s hatred of Jacob, has outlived even diaspora itself. As a result, oppression is believed to be the rule rather than the exception.
By telling the tale of Jews’ suffering in a world that conspires against their dreams, the writers consciously or unconsciously adhere to Susser’s so-called ideology of affliction as well as the adversity-centred segment of the Jewish heritage. Bellow admits that he is unable to foresee an end to the siege, “My view . . . is that there is no solution to the Jewish problem. Viciousness against Jews will never end in any foreseeable future; nor will the consciousness of being a Jew vanish” (“A Jewish Writer in America-II” 7). Malamud, on his part, thinks that it is the painful stories of the Jews that set his ‘imagination going’ and, thus, his sensibility is a response to their embittered history, “And of course I’ve been deeply moved by the Jews of the concentration camps, and the refugees wandering from nowhere to nowhere” (“The Art of Fiction No. 52, 10). These views by two self-proclaimed liberal and humanist Jewish-American writers give a new dimension to reading the incidents and characters they have created in their fiction. They give revival to old anxieties as their own contribution to and contemplation of a collective history. Arguably, incorporating the themes of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, regardless of how far-fetched that representation is, constitutes one of the many survival strategies. They are noticeably preoccupied with a quest for identity that is jeopardised by the atmosphere of forgetfulness imposed by pluralism and assimilation. In Choosing Survival, Bernard Susser and Charles S. Liebman observe that many American Jews “choose to centre their identity and sensibilities on traumatic events that emphasize powerlessness and victimhood. They understand as central to their own existence events that took place at a great remove from them” (61). By reproducing Hitler in whosoever shows hatred to the Jewish character and marking out as Nazi every thought, behaviour, or even machine associated with the extermination camps, the writers identify with the above-mentioned category.
It is important, however, while talking about the ideology of affliction, to distinguish it from the Zionist ideology to avoid misinterpretation. The former is neither systematic nor political though it may have some of their elements. It rather emerges embedded in the writers’ overall response and commitment to the issues of history, assimilation, and identity which are diasporic in nature. Zionism, by contrast, involves an organised ideology that takes upon itself establishing a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine and then convincing Jewish diasporas to return to their spiritual centre lest another genocide claims them again. In essence, Zionism seeks to end the hyphenated Jewish existence in Diaspora and even Diaspora itself. Bringing about the negation of diaspora, Zionism is, therefore, understood as the counterpart of diasporism which proposes that diasporic hyphenation represents the natural condition of the Jewish identity. The tension between these two opposing ideologies constitutes, with variable degrees, the backdrop of most of the Jewish-American discourse. Although Bellow, Malamud, and Wallant probe deeply into the anxieties haunting the Jewish-American psyche, no sufficient evidences indicate that they embrace the Zionist ideals. True, Bellow records his sympathy for Israel in *To Jerusalem and Back* and praises it in “A Jewish Writer in America-II” as “a legitimate option” (2) restoring the lost respect for diaspora Jews and abolishing victimisation. True also that Malamud’s moral ideal in *The Assistant* is the famous Zionist Austrian-Jewish philosopher Martin Bober. But their writing does not promote any of the Zionist propagandas that one can easily detect in Emma Lazarus and other Zionist Jewish-American writers. Nor does it embrace the diasporism of Philip Roth whose depiction of Jewishness is usually controversial. These writers, instead, depict diaspora as the only reality for Jews. It may contain numerous anxieties, border on danger and annihilation, and never be a real home, but, like
man’s existence as a being-thrown-into-the-world, it should be accepted authentically.

From a different perspective, coming to terms with the diasporic dilemmas, that one is quite aware of and ready to deal with, draws the writers’ approach closer to the ontological diasporic condition developed by Heidegger and other existentialists and which has been elucidated in the first chapter. Like the ontological state of being-thrown-into-the-world, the diasporic homelessness (Jew-thrown-into-diaspora) is enriched by alienation, sensitivity for suffering, and enslavement of other people. But at the bottom remains a diasporic hope to create a home out of homelessness. No matter how flawed and imperfect that home can be, it must be a miniature of life in general. Accepting diaspora, therefore, is like accepting life as a rich presence of absence where man is an eternal improviser. With regard to the endings of the novels examined by the present study, they almost all subscribe to the ontological-diasporic improvisation. The protagonists, who throughout the novels suffer from variable diasporic atrocities and anxieties, end up with a redemptive acceptance of their situations as they are. Mr. Sammler prefers staying in the defective and degenerated planet—suggestively standing for America—instead of flying to the unreal utopia of the moon. Herzog stops his physical and mental wanderings and becomes satisfied with leading a lonely life in his Ludeyeville estate. Leventhal’s upset mentality is redeemed to normalcy with the return of his wife and, thus, Albee’s anti-Semitic remarks no longer get on his nerves. Morris Bober dies but the tale of his patient suffering gets recycled through Alpine’s conversion to Judaism, running the grocery store, and carrying forth Bober’s responsibilities including helping Helen get her education. Bok’s escapism and skepticism are altered by a
strong commitment to his people and history. He is no longer worried over his trial or fate in prison. Nazerman is redeemed from complete numbness and detachment to the actual world of emotions and tears. At the end, he trusts his nephew with the task of assisting him in the pawnshop. He can also join others in their mourning. Paradoxically, by being able to cry, Nazerman feels the happiness of being touched again by life. And finally, Berman agrees to abandon the painful memory of his loss and goes to his daughter’s house to start his life afresh.

Authenticity, in this sense, means asserting the self by accepting the responsibility of being-in-the-world of diaspora for which one is chosen. The act of accepting responsibility, however, means that diasporic anxieties still exist but they are incorporated as part of one’s own existence and reality. Acknowledging homelessness as the authentic state of man in the world paves the way for contemplating the possibilities of creating a meaning out of meaninglessness. The postwar Jewish-American writer projects that existentialist equation on the microcosmic world of the Jewish diaspora in the New World’s urban setting. In the novels that have been discussed here, the anxieties of diaspora are depicted not in order to propagate home-returning but to contemplate the possibilities of finding one’s real and authentic being that emerges out of hardships. If it is accepted that Man’s Fall is the archetypal displacement with the subsequent life on the earth as an eternal homelessness, all other resultant and minor experiences of homelessness lose their initiative power to distress. This is why, while representing variable rubrics of the Diasporic Angst, Bellow, Malamud and Wallant nowhere in their novels preach homecoming or even speak to a diasporic centre. This approach is consistent with Stuart Hall’s emphasis on the metaphorical rather than literal use of the term:
“diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea” (235). By returning home which is anti-diasporic, Diasporic Angst can be overcome but that might lead to catastrophic ends. The journey of home-returning in the ontological diaspora takes place only after death. Likewise, for a Jew whose essence is naturally and historically diasporic returning home means a negation of the self. In that case, the anti-diasporic stance internalises violence that is directed not only against the individual’s nature but also against the potential human resources of other beings. In short, Diasporic Angst inspires the freedom to create a self out of the limits preset by the narrow horizons of a utopian home. The way to this self-creation, then, embarks from sacrificing the mythological and parochial for the real and universal.
Works Cited


