CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The emergence of Jewish – American fiction writers since world war II is, as Mark Shechner calls it a ‘social movement that has had enormous literary consequence’. But is it more than a sociological fact? And does it make sense to talk about Jewish – American fiction without knowing the literary attitude or school of the writers? Almost twenty years after the world war II Philip Rahv observed that ‘the Jewish – American writers do not in the least make up a literary faction or school’ and warned:

The homogenization, resulting from speaking of them as if they comprised some kind of literary faction or school is bad critical practice in that it is based on simplistic assumptions concerning the literary process as a whole as well as the nature of American Jewry, which, all appearances to the contrary, is very far from constituting a unitary group in its, cultural manifestation.

Jewish- American writers are American writers not Jewish writers, not members of a Jewish club, affiliated to each other not as Jews but as Americans. The distinction among them are for greater than the similarities, and to speak of them as ‘Jewish – American’ is to homogenize what should be particularized.

Every writer writes out of a culture. That culture may be a battleground of conflicting visions and values, and the writer may either embrace or attack his cultural heritage. But a writer’s work is
necessarily a product of and response to a culture. The great
tradition is culture formal laws and structures; for Jews, the great
tradition is the formal Jewish law, study and shared history that makes Jews one people.

What is central to the issue of the Jewishness of Jewish – American literature is the inheritance of Yidishkayt, a particular way of experiencing and reflecting the world. For Eastern European Jews and their descendants, which includes most Jewish – American writers, the folk culture, local folk expression of a group’s belief, unsystematized, not elaborately idealized, an oral tradition practiced constantly and often unconsciously by ordinary people without external enforcement or interference is Yidishkayt. It is a matter of everyday life and mundane concerns but is no less authentically Jewish because more homely than the Great Tradition of Hebrew and formal religion. The key aspects of Yidishkayt are … what is central is the sense of a people, a cohesive group bound together by ties of memory and history, by outer limits and hostility and inner meaning and mutuality. Being a Jew means being part of a chosen people with a distinct sense of uniqueness, purpose and calling. If the heart of the Protestant experience is the individual soul in relation to God and the heart of Catholicism is the church, then the heart of Judaism is the family – the biological family and the wider family of the Jewish people.
Jewish tradition and Jewish history, especially centuries of dispersion, exile, precariousness, homelessness and powerlessness gave rise to a distinct historical attitude towards humanity and heroes, what is glorified in Yiddish life and literature is intellectual pursuit, not for its own sake but, ideally, as a route to God, a means of understanding, Major themes of Jewish – American literature are the uneasy coming together of the American and the Jewish the enormous problems of acculturation and assimilation, and the radical questioning of the traditions and values of both cultures. Economic and social change, the rapid, disorienting move from ghetto or Shtetl to city to suburb, from street peddler and garment workers to doctor and professor - this is the external or social level of Jewish – American literature. The psychological or spiritual side of these narratives portrays a search for meaning or authority, an attempt to fill the void that accompanied rapid change, the loss of traditional values and meaning. Whatever deprivations and parochialism Shtetl life in Europe entailed, it was at least a word of values, order and meaning. The breakup of that world gave rise to doubt, anxiety, questioning and guilt – emotions and theme which dominate Jewish – American literature and give rise to a tone of complexity complaint, skepticism and irony.

Much Jewish – American literature is about the socio logical and psychological dimensions of Jewish life, about being Jewish in
America, and focuses on the Jew as Everyman – an ethnic one, but an Everyman. But some of the writing has been more particular, more specifically Jewish, and has emphasized the Jewish quality by relying on Jewish roots or sources.

Cynthia Ozick’s self-definition as a Jewish writer (a more pronounced and conscious identification than has been made by any other major Jewish–American writer) is reflected in her brilliant use of specifically Jewish sources. In fact in much of her best fiction Jewish sources are the fictional core Puttermesser and Xanthippa is built around a striking piece of Jewish folklore, the golem and artificially created human being endowed with life by supernatural means. Another important Ozick story, The Pagan Rabbi is an extended meditation on its epigraph from The Ethics of the Fathers Rabbi Jacob said:

He who is walking along and studying, but then breaks off to remark, ‘How lovely is that tree!’ or ‘How beautiful is that fallow field!’ scripture regards such a one as having hurt his own being.3

Like many good jokes, the old joke that cosmopolitanism is Jewish parochialism hits a nerve. Despite traditional particularism, one significant aspect of Jewish thought, especially in this century, has been an emphasis on the similarity of all human beings in their essential humanity and a commitment to one world brotherhood that transcends all distinctions and unites all human beings as human
beings. Early in the century both in Easter Europe and in United States a considerable portion of the Jewish community considered itself socialist, and these Jewish socialists were dedicated to building a new society a world – wide. International community in which all human beings would live without want in freedom and fulfillment. The important point is that theirs was a socialism that was more than political and economic, it was founded on a profound idealism, an idea of human liberation and secular utopia opposed to traditional Judaism, socialist Jews transferred messianism, one of the traditional elements of Jewish experience, to secular dreams.

While deeply grounded in Jewish life and feeling much contemporary Jewish – American fiction links its particular Jewishness to a guest for the universal; that is it affirms things Jewish but as one – albeit one special tread in the human fabric contemporary Jewish – American fiction is based on some traditional beliefs about the nature of the world, human beings and art. It assumes that however difficult to assess the world and human life have meaning, that human beings can, to a degree, know the world, and that people must live with moral choice and responsibility. Jewish – American fiction does not necessarily mirror the world realistically; indeed fantasy is a major resource of Billow Malamud, Roth and Ozick. But it is written on the premise that art communicates something about the nature of human beings and the
world and that its spiritual, moral and aesthetic qualities are an essential humanizing force.

Contemporary Jewish – American fiction is then a coherent body of work, that is there is something gained by grouping the individual writers and works in this way. Certain attitudes about what it means to be human and about the aims and possibilities of human life prevail in Jewish – American fiction. There are shared ideas about both life and art. Some of these ideas run counter to those of most American fiction; in particular, the Jewish – American vision of the individual as embedded in history and the family directly opposes the typical American conception of the American Adam, the solitary individual beginning a new day. And the underlying humanistic assumptions about the nature and value of art directly counter those of the counter those of experimental post – modernist fiction.

Cynthia Ozick is best known for her intricate prose style and use of magic realism to illustrate the appearance of metaphysical realities in ordinary lives. Much of her fiction concerns, Jewish characters, many of whom discover the significance of or are struggling to maintain their heritage in a predominantly Gentile world. Ozick often embodies this conflict in the theme of a quest for identity in her subsequent work, Ozick controls her treatment of language so that while it remains a dominant feature of he work, it
does not get in the way of the story itself. In general critics seem to feel that characterization and emotive qualities are the weak points of her work while words and ideas are the strong ones. Some critics find a contradiction between Ozick’s desire for a uniquely Jewish literature, on the one hand, and her abhorrence of a uniquely feminine literature, on the other. But nearly all consider her handling of language superb and her intellectual prowess stimulating she has familiar anxieties about imaginative freedom but also her awareness that’s life may turn bitter, cold and sterile in its absence is disclosed from her writings.

Erica Jong has one fictional heroine, behave, bookish, beautiful and priestess of the Great Goddess, whether that heroine is Fanny, the 18th century character or Isadora the much married best selling novelist of the wing trilogy (a Jew from the west 70s) or the much married international star Jessica Pruitt. All the heroines suffer due to their womanhood but on the other hand also extract earthly pleasures. They represent modern woman. Her plights, sorrows and also tremendous capacities. Erica Jong is always criticized for her free thoughts and writings on female sexuality. Yes, it is a dominant factor in all of her works. But that does not mean that she is a porne or cheap writer. Apart from this one factor there are many more ones on which she focuses. Quest for identity, struggle for existence, making a bright career in the age of male domination, celebration of
motherhood and above all preservation of Jewishness, Jewish identity are also the elements on which she writes extensively in her five novels which I have considered for writing the present dissertation.

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was founded on a profound idealism, an idea of human liberation and secular utopia. Opposed to traditional Judaism, socialist Jews transferred messianism one of the traditional elements of Jewish experience to secular dreams while deeply grounded in Jewish life and feelings. Much contemporary Jewish – American fiction links into particular Jewish ness to a quest for the universal that is, it affirms things Jewish but as one – albeit, one special thread in the human fabric.

And this thread is beautifully women in this writings of both the authors, Cynthia Ozick and Erica Jong. Ozick’s novels and stories and novellas are not only steeped in internal Jewish life and lore to a degree that sets them apart from, the work of her contemporaries and predecessors; they are actually Jewish assaults on fields of Gentile influence. Though she admires the transforming magical kind of art Ms. Ozick is in fact an intellectual writer whose works are the fictional realization of ideas.

But for Erica Jong to write as a woman is to write from an extreme situation. Her two novels Fear of Flying and How to Save Your Own Life end with a kind of symbolic ritual baptism in celebration of the female body. Although Jong concentrates on woman’s body its hungers its drives more centrally the novel’s marriage and a woman’s odyssey to love. Jong’s writings pose the questions: what is it to be a woman? Where lies salvation?
Ozick’s reader is expected at the conclusion of her writings to have an insight to understand the point of events rather than to respond to their affective power. Because she is a Jewish writer who prides herself on the centrally Jewish quality of her work, she has hit a curious snag. The problems of loss of memory and the possibilities or impossibilities of repairing that loss foregrounded everywhere in Ozick’s fiction. Ironically though the structure of her thinking about ethnicity emphasizes descent, Ozick’s historical situation places her in the role of evangelist or prophet calling for an alternative form of consent by which her Jewish audience and whatever gentiles are moved to do so – might come to inhabit Jewish memory anew.

Throughout Ozick’s fiction memories of the past or characters who embody the past appear in fantastic guise to warn of the consequences of forgetfulness or to provide some fragmentary instruction about the past.

Ms. Ozick and Erica Jong are two very famous Jewish – American writers Ms. Jong is a strong feminist and writes openly about sex and man – woman relationship, while Ms. Ozick writes about the traditional and modern Jewish morals and values. Erica Jong is a Jew, but a woman first, and being woman is a sin according to the males of the world. But Cynthia Ozick is a Jew, a staunch Jew Jong’s story, the narrative of the triumphs and vicissitudes of one writer’s reputation is unique but highly
instructive. It illustrates not only the contingencies that govern individual literary judgements and the importance of the intersection of the literary work with the cultural moment but also the remarkable role the media can play in contemporary literary reputation. Although Jong’s writing is unique. (and suggests that every reputation story is so) insofar as it is a woman writer’s story, it is also representative. Jong’s striking example has served to highlight and clarify certain cultural responses to writing by women. In some ways Jong is woman writ large. Made so by her identification with sexuality and feminism along with her status as a public figure, The story of her literary reputation may serve to illustrate that deeply held cultural values and beliefs about women have enormous influence in how writing by women is received.

Well, the writings of Cynthia Ozick and Erica Jong are an inspiration to all those who love their identity, their country and their originality. Their writings are a celebration of ‘womanhood’, ‘self identity’ as well as ‘patriotism’.
NOTES

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