

CONFLICT BETWEEN FLESH AND SOUL IN I.B. SINGER'S *THE SLAVE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about the protagonist Jacob who is torn between his desire and his duties. The religious duties do not allow him to fall in love with a girl from other religion but the desires of the body overpower his duties. Wanda brings change in the life of a slave. They love each other passionately. Jacob marries Wanda and takes her with him but she has to do a lot of sacrifices to remain with him. Jacob, a Jew by birth, converts Wanda to Sarah but is not able to live a happy life with her.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, a Nobel Prize Winner for Literature in 1978, was born in a Jew family in 1902 in Leocin village near Warsaw, Poland, a part of Russian empire. His father was a spiritual mentor and confessor, a rabbi. His mother also came from a family of rabbis. Due to the growing Nazi threat in neighboring Germany, he moved from Poland to the United States in 1935 four years before the German invasion and the Holocaust. He started his career as a journalist for 'The Forward', a Yiddish language newspaper. Singer made his debut as a novelist with *Satan in Goray*. He portrays the traditional Polish life in various periods of history in his novels. He tries to examine the role of Jewish faith in the lives of his characters. He shapes his world not only with the egos of his characters but also using moral commitments of the Jewish tradition that he grew up with. This leads to the dichotomy between the lives his heroes lead and the life they feel they should lead. Singer published 18 novels, 14 children's books, and a number of memoirs, essays and articles.

Singer in his works portrays human relations. His protagonists are always in conflict with the inner and the outer world, the inner world which always compels them to think of their actions and the outer world which is full of restrictions and problems. His protagonists are Jews by religions that are living in the world of Christians. Somewhere they come in contact with Christians where they have to rethink their accepted beliefs. They often surrender their religious faith for the sake of love. But even in such critical situations they never give up their religion. Though the holocaust has almost finished their race and living the life of a Jew is almost a pain, they never give up their religion. On the contrary they make their faith so strong that when they get a chance, they convert their beloved in to a Jew. Such is a case we find in Singer's famous novel *The Slave*.

The protagonist of the novel *The Slave* (1962) is Jacob, a Jew by birth. The story takes place somewhere in the seventeenth century. He is a resident of Josefov, a Jewish town in Poland. His three children and wife were murdered in the Khmelnytsky massacre by Cossaks (1648-49). He is sold as a slave to a pagan peasant farmer Jan Bzik. He is a Jew and the only thing that comforts him is his belief in religion. He is brought as a slave where he is preoccupied with his recitation of sermons and his regular work. He never thinks of new life.

He lives as a slave for four years. He is asked to look after the farm. He is alone there. The owner's daughter Wanda takes food for him. She is a widow. She is in love with him but does not dare to say so. He also likes her but as he is a Jew he can not accept her. A snake bit him once and she had sucked all the venom out. She takes food for him every evening and brings back the milk. If her father asked him some work on the day of Sabbath, she would do it for him. She is alone and childless. She finds some kind of comfort in him. Her father is a sick man and may die any time.

One night it rains heavily and Jacob gives up all the hopes of food. But even in such rains, Wanda comes with food. She serves him and finds no option to return as rains don't stop. She sleeps on the other side. Jacob also does not want to touch her as she is a forbidden woman by religion. She is a pagan and he a Jew. He sleeps but sometime in the night he finds her sleeping with him. She tries to come close to him. Initially he resists but he is not able to avoid the temptation. He agrees to sleep with her but even in such situation he remembers the rituals done before sex in his religion.

"They clung to each other as if undergoing martyrdom. Thus, at the time of the massacres Jews had plunged into fire and water. At last, his feet on a firm bottom, Jacob said to Wanda, 'Immerse yourself'". (p.67)

He asks her to take a dip in river and become clean. She resists as it is too cold and it's night. But he insists and Wanda succumbs to his force. She led by him goes to the rivulet and takes a dip. Confirmed that she is pure, Jacob sleeps with her.

It is surprising that a man of religion forsakes his religious bondages for the sake of love. He thinks a lot whether to accept Wanda or not. But ultimately flesh wins over soul. As he is living a lonely life and has no hopes, she brings hope for his life. He decides to live life with her. She while love making requests him to take her to his land and make her a Jew. Jacob knows the problems in it but he plans certain things and says 'yes' to her. In the winter he is called to sleep in the hut of Jan Bzik. He slept in the granary. She visited him regularly at night and they made passionate love. Whole day and night he starts thinking about Wanda. One day Jan Bzik dies and Jacob comes in a greater danger. The people around him always wanted to kill him but due to Bzik they did not dare to. Jacob felt most insecure with the death of his master.

One day when Wanda was away with her brother to a nearby village to buy a cow, Jacob is summoned by Zagayek the bailiff. He thinks that it is an end to his life. He prepares himself to face the consequences. When he reaches there he comes to know that some Jews from his village have come to ransom him back. The deal is done and Jacob has to leave the place without meeting Wanda. They take him to Josefov. He goes there but he can not comfort

himself there. He misses Wanda. To stop the thoughts of Wanda he devises several ways of torturing himself like fasting, keeping pebbles in his shoes, a stone beneath the pillow, and so on. The resident Jews decide to remarry him with a widow elder to him who has a grown up daughter. The marriage is fixed and the date is confirmed. One night Wanda appears in his dream and she is pregnant. He can not leave Wanda in such a situation, he thinks. He returns the ransom money to the Jews and decides to live take out Wanda from her place and go somewhere and live a happy life.

One midnight he reaches Wanda's village but finds it very difficult to take her with him. Overcoming all the hurdles he brings her to him. They reach Pilitz. But there the major problem arises. The Jews cannot accept a heathen as his bride. So he gives her a new name Sarah and baptizes her. To avoid any revelations of her religion he asks her to behave as if she is deaf and dumb. She very obediently follows his orders. He becomes a teacher for the sake of his livelihood. He and Wanda take the utmost care that Wand's identity is not revealed. Whenever Jacob finds some time he teaches Wanda the local language and the language of the Jews. Everybody starts believing that Sarah is deaf and dumb.

One day Pilitzky the manager of the town is very angry with his care taker Greshon. He orders Greshon to be hanged in public. Though Jacob hated Greshon as he had troubled him, he goes to save him. Sarah is frightened that Pilitzky is going to kill Jacob. Forgetting everything she pleads before Pilitzky to spare Jacob. All are surprised that Sarah can speak. Pilitzky feels that it is the magic of Jacob that he made Sarah speak. He appoints Jacob his new manager. If Jacob doesn't accept, he would throw all the Jews out of the town. Jacob accepts the post in order to save his community.

Sarah remains pregnant. Meanwhile Jacob becomes famous in Pilitz. He is considered as a husband of a holy woman. He is welcome everywhere. But this growing popularity worries Jacob. He knows that one day Sarah is going to scream in her labor pains. And it happens. She goes through the labour pains but the child is difficult to be born. Sarah realizes that these are the last moments of her life. The women around her start speaking about her burial. Unable to bear the pain she starts speaking Polish. Women are shocked but they conclude that it is some devil that is speaking as she is dying. She gives birth to the child and dies. Pilitzky learns the truth that Sarah was not a Jew. He orders Jacob to leave the town otherwise he will be burned to death.

A meeting of the community is called where it is decided tht Sarah is not be buried in the cemetery but out of the cemetery. Jacob is called where he tells his story. He is imprisoned and taken to be killed. Somehow he escapes and reaches Vistula. One ferryman offers Jacob food and shelter. There he meets a Jew from the Holy Land. He is asked to save the child and go to the Holy Land. Jacob goes back to Pilitz where he comes to know that Sarah's body has already been buried. He goes to the peasant where his son was and takes it with him. The woman gives her own breast milk in a bottle to feed the baby on the way. Jacob leaves with his son for Israel. He names his son Benjamin, the child born of sorrow.

Benjamin grows up to become a lecture in a yeshiva in Jerusalem. Jacob returns to Pilitz after twenty years. He visits the place where Sarah was buried. As he has grown weak he dies in

Pilitz. People come to know about their love. They find Sarah's bones and bury Jacob beside her. The love story of Jacob and Wanda is complete. Though they could not live peacefully being alive, their death brings them together eternally.

Singer's novels represent both the desire for the soul and the desire for the body. The desire for body is not lust in Singer's novels. It is a mark of an individual's personal psychic integration, wholeness and whole being. Jacob realizes that social justice and love are far more important than traditions and rituals. The marriage between Jacob and Wanda is presented as both deeply physical and spiritual. Jacob and Sarah involve with each other passionately at the same time they debate and discuss the ultimate religious and moral questions.

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