

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

August 2013 Vol. 4 Issue IV

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“To perceive is to suffer”–Aristotle: A Post-Colonial Reading of Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen*

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Jewish diasporic communities around the world were not free from tribulations. Too often they have been ghettoized and excluded from the reality of belonging to the ‘new country’, and they suffered when their cultural practices were mocked at and discriminated against. They were often harassed by imperialism, racism and Anti-Semitism. As they migrated to their ‘golden land’, America, they found some respite from all those evils that hounded them. But they still bore the burden of suffering and the sting of millions of Jews slaughtered mercilessly. The concept of ‘home’ was yet another dream that haunted them and which materialized in 1948 after a long combat and torment. Chaim Potok’s novels exemplify these post-colonial Jewish experiences through the lives of his characters and the events in his novels. The Jewish experience is essentially one of suffering and this is perfectly embodied in his first novel *The Chosen*.

The chosen narrates the story of two Jewish teenagers –Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders living in America amidst the Second World War. Though the story mainly focuses on the relationship between father and son, and Reuven and Danny, the post-colonial experiences they endure and suffering owing to it, form the background of the novel and it cannot be ignored as it influence the life of each and every character in the novel. The post-colonial experience of migration and “search for homeland” owing to imperialism, racism and modernity owing to alienation can be unveiled while studying the text carefully with Jewish history

IMPERIALISM AND SUFFERING IN *THE CHOSEN*

Historical Background¹

The Jewish history of exile and migration is generally assumed to begin from the time of Moses in Egypt when the Jews were tortured and deported by the Pharaoh of Egypt to Palestine. The memory of the Egyptian episode was never allowed to become dim. The Jews prefaced many of their later laws, significantly, with the phrases “Remember your bondage in Egypt”, “Once you ate the bread of affliction”, etc. The Egyptian episode left a permanent mark. It influenced all future social thinking about the rights of the weak, the underprivileged and the dispossessed. But their misery did not end there; it followed them as a curse until the creation of Israel in the 20th century.

During 922 B.C., a violent revolt broke out and divided the Hebrew state, Palestine, into two kingdoms - the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The

¹ The following sections rely to a considerable extent on Uriah Zevi Engelman’s *The Rise of the Jew in the Western World*.

Assyrians, who conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, exiled 30,000 of its inhabitants and resettled the territory with captives from other lands. They exiles were quickly assimilated by their new environment and disappeared from history as an organic entity. The Babylonians, who conquered the southern kingdom of Judah, also resorted to transplantation. But these men of Judah, the most vital and articulate elements of the land, carried with them a strong sense of nationalism. They refused to disappear. In exile, their prophets, notably Ezekiel, taught them that they were heirs of a great tradition, that they had a unique destiny to fulfill, and that the dry bones in the valley would some day again be infused with the breath of life. After the defeat of the Babylonians by the Persians, Cyrus, king of Persia, granted Jewish exiles permission to return to Palestine. The next two centuries were wracked by the wars of the competing empires surrounding it. The imperialists, Alexander the Great, Ptolemy, Pompey, showed their might and ravished the entire city of Palestine. The Jews went into exile to all corners of the world clutching their beliefs and tradition. At the threshold of modern history then, just before the French revolution, the main Jewish settlements were in Poland, in the far flung Turkish possessions of Asia and in southeastern Europe. There were smaller settlements in Italy, Holland, and a few provinces of the old Holy Roman Empire. Thus Jews were scattered all over the world without having a soil to claim as 'homeland' and lived as diasporic communities in different countries, depending on the benevolence of the natives.

Jews and Migration in *The Chosen*

The history of Jews in America begins with major events in the discovery of the New World and is rooted in the westward geographical expansion and migrations of European Jewry during the 17th century. However, for most of the approximately five million Jews who are now an integral part of the United States population, their story more closely belongs to the great movement of peoples across the Atlantic during the 19th and 20th centuries, which brought over 38 million immigrants into the U.S (aish.com). The main characters of the novel *The Chosen*; Reb Saunders, David Malter, Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter are Russian Jews who migrated to America due to the impact of imperialism and the revolts by Cossacks during the First World War. Potok gives a brief history of the migration of Saunders family in the novel. In the middle of the 18th century the Jewish population in Eastern Europe from Middle East and Germany totalled approximately 1,500,000, of whom the greatest number was concentrated in Poland. There were large Jewish settlements in Russian-controlled territory too. The protagonist of *The Chosen*, Danny Saunders, son of Reb Saunders, belongs to a family descended from this clan of immigrant Polish Jews (later they come under Russian territory and thus joined the clan of Russian Jews). Danny's ancestors fled from the persecutions of German imperialists to Poland during the Middle Ages. At first, Poland had seemed a new Promised Land, under able and hospitable rulers. But it was just a brief Indian summer of tolerance.

The great Cossack Wars (the revolt against Polish nobles) of the mid-17th century devastated the land settled by Saunders family and other Jews. The Polish state began to founder. Administrative anarchy disrupted the country and the Jewish situation changed disastrously. Indeed, during the Cossack wars, there were massacres on a larger scale than ever had disgraced Christian Europe. In the Russian occupied territory of Poland there were severe restrictions upon movement and upon the livelihood of the Jews which included the Saunders family. They suffered greatly during the 1648 Cossack uprising which had been directed primarily against the Polish nobility. The Jews, perceived as allies of the nobles, were also victims of the revolt, during which about twenty per cent of them were killed. In 1795 Poland was partitioned and the Polish capital was doomed. From this point forward, down to modern times, the Jews in Russia –

and Russia now included most of former Poland - faced an incessant struggle for survival. Chaim Potok using his characters Reb Saunders, Danny Saunders and David Malter as mouth-piece narrate the plight of Jews in Russia and the miseries they put up with to fight against their rivals and to endure migration to America.

The protagonist Danny's grandfather had been a well known Hasidic rabbi in a small town in southern Russia, and Danny's father, Reb Saunders, had been the second of two sons. The firstborn son had been in line to inherit his father's rabbinic position, but during a period of study in Odessa he suddenly vanished. The second son Reb Saunders, Danny's father, was ordained at the age of seventeen, and by the time he was twenty had achieved an awesome reputation as a Talmudist (Jewish scholar). When his father died, he naturally inherited the position of rabbinic leadership. He remained the rabbi of his community throughout the years of Russia's participation in the First World War. One week before the Bolshevik Revolution, in the autumn of 1917, his young wife bore him a second child, a son. Two months later, his wife, his son, and his eighteen-month-old daughter were shot to death by a band of marauding Cossacks, one of the many bandit gangs that roamed through Russia during the chaos that followed the revolution. He himself was left for dead, with a pistol bullet in his chest and a saber wound in his pelvis. He laid unconscious for half a day near the bodies of his wife and children, and then the Russian peasant who tended the stove in the synagogue and swept its floor found him and carried him to his hut, where he extracted the bullet, bathed the wounds and tied him to the bed so he would not fall out during the days and nights he shivered and screamed with the fever and delirium that followed.

The synagogue had been burned to the ground. Its Ark was a gutted mass of charred wood, its four torah scrolls were seared black, its holy books were piles of gray ash blown about by the wind. Of the one hundred eighteen Jewish families in the community only forty three survived. The First World War began a new wave of annihilation for Jews in Europe. All people suffered, but a great part of the war on the eastern front was fought primarily in the area where the Jews were concentrated. Along the frontiers of Austria, Germany, and Russia the devastation for the Jews was incalculable. There was more than military carnage, blockade, and starvation. There were also pogroms, executions, and wholesale deportations. When the war ended, the foundations of corporate Jewish life in every eastern European country had been so severely shaken that it seemed impossible for normal living to be restored.

When it was discovered that the Reb Saunders was not dead but was being cared for by the Russian peasants, he was brought into the still-intact home of a Jewish family and nursed back to health. He spent the winter recovering from his wounds. During that winter the Bolsheviks signed the treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany, and Russia withdrew from the war. The chaos inside the country intensified, and the village was raided four times by Cossacks. The Cossacks were anti-Bolsheviks. The Cossack sense of being a separate and elite community gave them a strong sense of loyalty to the Tsarist imperial government of Russia and Cossack units were frequently used to suppress domestic disorder, especially during the Russian Revolution of 1905. The Imperial Government depended heavily on the perceived reliability of the Cossacks. But the fall of the Tsarist government and rise of the Bolsheviks, who supported Jews but despised them, started a revolt against the Jews and Reb Saunders' family was one of the victims. Reb Saunders and his followers were warned by friendly peasants and were concealed in the woods or in huts. In the spring, the rabbi announced to his people that they were done with Russia; Russia was Esav and Edom, the land of Satan and the Angel of Death. They would travel together to America and rebuild their community.

Eight days later, they left. They bribed and bargained their way through Russia, Austria, France, Belgium, and England. Five months later, they arrived in New York city in America. Thus Russian Jews were pathetic victims of imperial Russia ruled by Russian Tsars with the help of the Cossacks. The revolution in Russia to bring down the Russian autocracy was seen as a “Jewish Conspiracy” by imperial powers who called upon loyal Russians to save the state from the machination of “aliens”. Pogroms, civil disqualifications, massacres, legal and economic restrictions and increased military obligations which augmented their suffering - all gave tremendous impetus to Saunders’ migration to America. Reb Saunders with his followers found refuge in America, escaping from the assaults of pro-imperialists, carrying the responsibility and sufferings of the remaining Jews as his own; in the words of the character David Malter in *The Chosen*, “Reb Saunders is a great man, Reuven. Great men are always difficult to understand. He carries the burden of many people on his shoulders. . . ” (141)

A great deal of Reb Saunders’ family’s tragedy was due to the outcome of their incessant migration from one country to another. His ancestors migrated from Palestine to Germany where they were massacred in millions as they were considered an inferior race. Later they migrated to the Russia controlled territory of Poland where they suffered under the rule of imperialist Tsars and their allies, the Cossacks. And during Reb Saunders’ time they migrated from Russia to America where they were branded as ‘fanatics’.

Nowhere did Saunders family enjoyed the blessings of citizenship. Whatever happiness they found was in their internal social and religious organisation. They had a long way to go, before political emancipation finally came, before they could bridge the gap that would make them full Europeans. Had the Jews like Saunders and Malter possessed a homeland free of all imperialists, they would have evaded this ceaseless migration from one continent to another seeking shelter, food and security, which is the main cause of their boundless misery and suffering. Migration turned out to be a predetermined part of their history. Throughout their history, their clan have repeatedly been directly or indirectly expelled from both their original homeland, and the areas in which they have resided. This experience as both immigrants and emigrants has shaped their identity and religious practice in many ways, and is thus a major aspect of their life. The myth of the “wandering Jew”, an original legend concerning a Jew who taunted Jesus on the way to the crucifixion and was doomed to the punishment of endless roaming and suffering on the Earth, still cast a binding influence on the lives of the Jew and Reb Saunders and David Malter are those ill-fated ‘wandering Jew’ in the novel *The Chosen*, wandering from place to another chasing their destiny .

Jews and Their Search for a Homeland in *The Chosen*

The idea of a national land, so lyrically invested in Jewish prophesy, liturgy, and secular literature, was never wholly uprooted from the collective consciousness of the Jews. In the centuries of dispersion and struggle, it survived and widened; Zionism thus evolved as an organised political effort to bring to fruition the need of the Jews for an autonomous, self-governing homeland in Palestine. The vitality of the Zionist idea was in direct proportion to the extent of Jewish exclusion from the privileges and security of the general community. It rose from the ashes of one messianic movement after another. Beginning with the late 17th century, however, it progressed from medieval pieties to mundane projects when the concept of a large-scale return to Palestine took shape in many utopian and curiously ingenious schemes, petitions, memoranda, letters, and pamphlets. Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism movement declared: “The object of Zionism is to establish for the Jewish people a publicly and legally assured home in Palestine.” (*Americana Encyclopedia* Vol J 85)

David Malter, the narrator Reuven's father, is portrayed as a Zionist whose ultimate dream was to create a homeland for Jews in Palestine. He was extremely anguished by the reports of German concentration camps. The stories of the horrors that had occurred in those camps paralysed him. He became involved in Zionist activities and was always attending meetings where he spoke about the importance of Palestine as a Jewish homeland and raised money for the Jewish National Fund. As Malter puts it, “

The world closed its doors, and six million Jews were slaughtered. What a world! What an insane world! What do we have left to us now, if not American Jewry? Some Jews say we should wait for God to send the Messiah. We cannot wait for God to send the Messiah. We cannot wait for God! We must make our own Messiah! We must rebuild American Jewry! And Palestine must become a Jewish homeland! We have suffered enough! How long must we wait for the Messiah?”
(186)

He also taught an adult studies course in the history of political Zionism at the synagogue on Monday nights and another adult course in the history of America Jewry at his yeshiva (Jewish school) on Wednesday nights. He worked day and night to unfetter his people from shackles of despondency and butchery. After he learns about the Holocaust, we see him change from a gentle, mellow father into an impassioned Zionist activist. David Malter states his motivations for his ceaseless Zionist activity clearly in Chapter 13, when he explains to Reuven that a “man must fill his life with meaning, meaning is not automatically given to life.” This statement reflects David Malter's growing feeling that it is not enough to wait passively for biblical prophesy, as Reb Saunders does. Rather, David Malter feels it is up to mankind to actively give meaning to the world and make sense of the horrible suffering of the Holocaust. As Sternlicht explains, the only way for David Malter to make sense of the Holocaust is for the Holocaust to incite the Jewish people's return to the ancient land of Israel.

Chaim Potok also describes the activities of the Haganah and Irgun boys, the Jewish terrorists group in Palestine, in his fiction. They rebelled against the British Army in Palestine. While the Irgun engaged in terror by blowing up trains, attacking police stations, cutting communications lines, the Haganah continued smuggling Jews through the British naval blockade in defiance of the British colonial office, which had sealed Palestine off to further Jewish immigration. Violence erupted and Irgun blood was being shed for the sake of a future Jewish state. Here Potok gives an insight into British imperialism that prevailed in Middle East during the Second World War.

David Malter plans a mass rally in Madison Square Garden. He delivers a speech that describes the two thousand year old Jewish dream of a return to Zion, the Jewish blood that had been shed through the centuries, the indifference of the world to the problem of a Jewish homeland, the desperate need to arouse the world to the realisation of how vital it was that a homeland be established immediately on the soil of Palestine. In the words of Malter,

Where else would the remnant of Jewry that had escaped Hitler's ovens go? The slaughter of six million Jews would have meaning only on the day a Jewish state was established. Only then would their sacrifice begin to make some sense; only then would the songs of faith they had sung on their way to the gas chambers take on meaning; only then would Jewry again become a light to the world as Ahad Ha'am had foreseen”. (215)

Finally, the conflict of Palestine Partition was passed on to the United Nations and the vote was finally held on November 29, 1948 for the final decision. David Malter and his son

Reuven cried like babies, embraced and kissed each other on hearing the news. “The death of the six million Jews had finally been given meaning”, he kept saying over and over again. It had happened. After two thousand years, it had finally happened. They were people with their own land once again. They were a blessed generation. They had been given the opportunity to see the creation of a Jewish state. “ ‘Thank God!’ he said. ‘Thank God! Thank God!’ We alternately wept and talked until after three in the morning when we finally went to bed”, narrates Reuven(226). This is the instance where Potok shows his mastery in portraying the elation caused by the Jewish realisation of their dream for a homeland.

In subsequent weeks, Arab forces began to attack the Jewish communities of Palestine to protest against the creation of Israel. An Arab mob surged through Princess Mary Avenue in Jerusalem, wrecking and gutting shops and leaving the old Jewish commercial center looted and burned, and as the toll of Jewish dead increased daily, Reb Saunders’ league, which advocated anti-zionism (the creation of Jewish state only after the advent of Messiah) too became silent and was distressed by this attack. “ ‘Again Jewish blood is being spilled,” they whispered to one another. ‘Hitler wasn’t enough. Now more Jewish blood, more slaughter. What does the world want from us? Six million isn’t enough? More Jews have to die?’ ” (227). Their pain over this new outbreak of violence against the Jews of Palestine outweighed their hatred of Zionism. The death of a former student in Reuven’s school under the carnage of Arabs in Jerusalem confirmed their conclusive need for a homeland. As Reuven narrates with pain and grief,

The next few weeks were black and ugly. The Etzion area in the Hebron Mountains fell, the Jordan Valley, the Egyptian Army invaded the Negev, and the battle for Latrun , the decessive point along the road to Jerusalem, turned into bloodbath. My father became grim and silent, and I began to worry about his health. (241)

David Malter plucks up courage and fights for both his health and homeland. Reb Saunders, who was against Zionism also realises that his presumption of creating Israel only after the imminence of the Messiah was wrong and the death of six million Jews and his brother would have meaning only with the conception of a new Jewish land. And at last, in the second week of May in 1948, Israel was born, fulfilling the life-long dream of Jews like David Malter and Reuven Malter.

Inspite of all trials and tribulations Jewish diasporic communities around the world, which could never break off their ineludible link with their past migrant history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background, succeeded in their mission to recreate a homeland, a place for shelter, stability, security and comfort, and a land that gave them a sense of ‘belonging’. In the novel Potok has thus shown Zionist activities in America had a major role in arousing the nationalist spirit in American Jews through the character of David Malter. His passion and labour for a homeland inspite of his suffering from poor health and heart attack is the representation of every Jew’s daring enterprise to create a ‘homeland’ of their own bereft of any malicious power manipulating them. The suffering of Jews in pogroms of Eastern Europe, the Holocaust and the rise of Arab nationalism all served to fuel the Zionist movement of Malter for the establishment of a Hebrew state in Palestine.

ALIENATION AND SUFFERING IN *THE CHOSEN* **Historical Background²**

² This section relies on Baron for historical details.

From the beginning, the Jews' claim to be a 'chosen people', their refusal to worship other Gods, and their insistence on special religious laws placed them in a vulnerable position and gave them the label 'alienated species'. In the ancient Roman Empire, very few Jews were admitted to Roman citizenship. Early Christians held the Jews responsible for the crucifixion of Christ; an allegation that became the justification of antipathy towards Jews for many centuries. The middle ages were dominated by Christians, which further aggravated the desolation of the Jews. Periodic persecution of Jews occurred. By the end of the 15th century, the inquisition put to trial Jews and other non-conformists in Spain, culminating in the expulsion of Jews from the country. A number of Jews, however, became Christians in order to remain in Spain, but they continued to practice Judaism secretly. They were referred to as 'Marranos', a pejorative which meant 'pig'. At about the same time, similar oppressive measures were enforced in England, France and Germany. Jews were also forced to live in ghettos. Outside the gates they were obliged to wear an identifying badge reducing them to the status of an 'outcast'. The harassment of the Jews did not stop there; they were pursued by successions of Crusades, by the restrictions of the church council, the hatred of churchmen and Jew-baiters. In 1860, it was the Austrian Jewish scholar Moritz Steinschneider who referred to Jewish hatred as "antisemitic prejudices" to characterise the idea that Semitic races were inferior to Aryan races. In the 19th century, the holocaust was a racial Anti-Semitism practised by Adolf Hitler. The pogroms in Russia and Nazism on territories captured by Hitler caused a mass immigration to the U.S and the establishment of colonies in Palestine. Though they found their 'golden land' in the U.S, their strict adherence to their tradition and beliefs still marginalised them as an alienated or a separate cult. The young generation of Jews found it difficult to strike a balance between their tradition and modernity in the New World. Though they were content growing up within Jewish religion and culture, they sensed that there existed a world beyond their Jewish one, a secular world of freedom and opportunities where they could receive unbiased treatment.

Jews and Racism

The Lexicon Encyclopedia defines racism as the "theory or doctrine stating that inherited physical characteristics such as skin colour, facial features, hair texture and the like, determine behaviour patterns, personality traits or intellectual abilities." It has contributed to the practices of prejudice and discrimination among groups in many parts of the world. Jews are frequently called a race in the same sense that the English or Irish are called so. Jews stood out from other races with their physical features such as pale colour, tall stature, nasal voice, dark eyes and hair, side curls and long hooked 'Jewish' nose, in spite of some exceptions. One can see this trait in Reuven's description of Danny Saunders "His chin, jaw, and cheek bones were made up of jutting hard lines, his nose was straight and pointed, his lips full, rising to a steep angle from the center point beneath his nose and then slanting off to form a too-wide mouth"; and about Reb Saunders he says that "his voice was deep and nasal, like Danny's" (120). Their unusual physical features and practices could have engendered a sense of prejudice in other races especially the 'Aryan' race. Adding to their misery, the theory of the French ethnologist J.A Gobineau on the superiority of the Aryan race and the ideas of the Anglo-German political philosopher H.S Chamberlain on racial purity, exercised a great influence on subsequent racist policies. Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler based its extermination of millions of Jews and other 'non-Aryans' on this theory of race-supremacy and the corollary concept of racial purity. The events in the novel *The Chosen* are set in the background of the Second World War when Hitler resolves to erase the trace of the Jewish race from the world. Anti-Semitism became an organized movement

during the late 19th century and the major characters of the novel witnesses the atrocities meted out to their folk in Palestine and Germany.

Though the characters lived in America and have not been the victim of Nazi atrocities directly, Potok has embodied the reactions and responses of Jewish characters in his novel to the violence on Jews and how it had a profound influence on each character's outlook of life. The father characters of the novel, Reb Saunders and David Malter are rendered horror struck on listening to the reports of the German concentration camps that annihilated thousands of their men.

Six million of our people have been slaughtered . . . it is inconceivable. It will have meaning only if we give it meaning . . . there is only one Jewry left now in the world . . . it is here, in America. We have a terrible responsibility. We must replace the treasures we have lost . . . the Jewish world has change . . . a madman has destroyed our treasures. If we do not rebuild Jewry in America, we will die as a people." (182)

David Malter whimpers on hearing the reports of Jews extermination. They conceive the sufferings of their people as their own. They pity themselves for their ill-fated destiny. Reb Saunders wonders why they are still chased by all this malice in spite of their brutal suffering at the hands of the Cossacks. "It didn't make any sense at all. My mind couldn't hold on to it, to the death of six million people," thought Reuven. Their very existence seemed incongruous and futile with their men being murdered ruthlessly for the simple reason that they belonged to a different race. "The world will kill us, Ah, how the world kills us," retorts Reb Saunders, "How the world drinks our blood! How the world makes us suffer. It is the will of God. We must accept the will of God. Master of the Universe, how do you permit such a thing to happen?" He couldn't find an answer to this baffling question. Why they were chosen to suffer? Why couldn't others identify them as a part of humanity created by the same God? Where is mercy? Where is love? Where is compassion? These could be the unanswered doubts that plagued the mind of the characters in the novel. Reb Saunders was quiet and dismal, he couldn't explain his agony; he was despondent all the time as if conceiving a flood of torment. The situation was not different with David Malter, as he read an account of what happened at Teresienstadt, where the Germans had imprisoned and murdered European Jews of culture and learning - he broke down and wept like a child. Both Reb Saunders and David Malter could feel the suffering of their fellow-beings. They knew that a common thread connected their destinies and they are ordained to suffer together. They carried the suffering of their race; no one cared for them but they themselves bore that burden. David Malter interrogates:

Did we know that on December 17,1942, Mr.Eden got up in the House of Commons and gave the complete details of Nazi plans, already in full operation, to massacre the entire Jewish population of Europe? Did we know that Mr.Eden, though he had threatened the Nazis with retribution, hadn't said a word about practical measures to save as many Jews as possible from what he knew was their inevitable fate? There had been public meetings in England, protests, petitions, letters, the whole machinery of democratic expression had been set in motion to impress upon the British government the need for action but not a thing was done. (186)

Everyone was sympathetic, but no one was sympathetic enough to save the Jews from their doom. Even the Chmielnicki uprising of Cossacks and polish peasants in Russia where Reb Saunders and his family became the victims was also a part of Anti-Semitism. As Jews were

considered as an “intellectual race”, Saunders’ ancestors received a favourable reception in Poland from Germany. But their intellectuality was a ‘curse’ which triggered their impending doom in Poland. As David Malter explains,

Poland wanted people who would build her economy, organise her affairs, and bring her to life. Jews had a reputation for possessing these abilities, and so the Polish nobles were eager to have Jews settled in their country. They came by the thousand from Western Europe, especially from Germany...and then Reuven, a great tragedy occurred. It is a tragedy that happens often to anyone who acts as buffer. The Jews were helping the nobility, but in doing so, in collecting taxes from the serfs and peasants, for example, they were building up against themselves the hatred of these oppressed classes.(98)

Oppression and hatred were part and parcel of their life. Jews suffered everywhere they found refuge; suffering was the part of their inexorable fate. Their predicament spoke for them: how could man be cruel and brutal like a beast? How can he be so self-centered and forget his tie with God to love and serve mankind? No wonder why Danny Saunders was fascinated by a passage in the book *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway, where it talks about ants on a burning log. The hero, an American, is watching the ants, and instead of taking the log out of the fire and saving the ants, he throws water on the fire. The water turns into steam and that roasts some of the ants, and the others just burn to death on the log or fall off into the fire. “It shows how cruel people can be” says Danny (80) and asks Reuven staring out the window “Look at that. Look at all those people. They look like ants. Sometimes I get the feeling that’s all we are- ants. Do you ever feel that way?” (80)

In the novel Potok has showed how racism led to suffering, affecting the lives of the major characters of the novel, how it changed one’s perception of the world, destiny and God, how it disclosed the ludicrousness and hollowness of life. Reuven fathoms the empty sound of life, Danny grasps the pettiness of man, Reb Saunders discerns the cold-bloodedness of the world and David Malter comprehends the absurdity of life. The characters speculate: when would the world be free of bias based on race, religion and colour? When will they be granted justice? When would the Messiah arrive to punish ruthless fiends like Hitler whose first and foremost task was to wipe out their race from the earth? The characters are bewildered until they find some solace in the defeat of Hitler in Second World War and the creation of their nation Israel in Palestine in May 14, 1948. “It is the end of Hitler, may his name and memory be erased; Master of the Universe, it has taken so long, but now the end is here” applauds Reb Saunders(176). Political developments are not just a backdrop to the novel; they motivate the novel’s character and plot developments. Potok implies that in the modern world, individual lives are inseparable from larger historical developments.

Jews and Modernity in *The Chosen*

Much of the novel’s action is internal or introspective as the two boys tussle to understand their personal destinies, fluttering between their traditional beliefs and secularism or modernity in America. Potok not only shows strife within society between Jews and other races, but also shows an inner struggle that occurs within Danny and Reuven as they mature. Danny, who belongs to the dynasty of Hasidic Jews is expected to become a Tzaddik (leader of the Hasidim dynasty) after his father. But Danny couldn’t think of a religious life crammed with followers and rituals. He wishes a secular life untouched by duties and traditions.

Being influenced by Freud, he aspires to become a psychologist whose beliefs are against the ethics of Jews. He is torn between his obligation to his dynasty and his personal desire to

become a psychologist. He wants to escape from being an 'alien', to a secular world where he can identify himself as a normal human being without any prejudices or discrimination harbored against him for being a Jew. Danny behaves like a typical American boy playing baseball and reading secular books; as Reuven tells Danny, "You look like you walked out of another century. You play baseball like Babe Ruth. You talk like you are from outer space" (68).

Danny struggles to break away from his dynasty and thrusts his responsibility on his ailing brother to become a Tzaddik but he is still haunted by his indissoluble ties to his tradition. "I said my brother would probably make a fine Tzaddik," Danny said quietly to Reuven. "It occurred to me recently that if I didn't take my father's place I wouldn't be breaking the dynasty after all. My brother could take over. I had talked myself into believing that if I didn't take his place I would break the dynasty. I think I had to justify to myself having to become a tzaddik" (190). Danny reads Darwin and Huxley against his father's consent. But he has no choice other than inherit his father's position; as Danny points out "I have to take my father's place. I have no choice. It's an inherited position. I'll work it out - somehow. It won't be that bad, being a rabbi. Once I'm a rabbi my people won't care what I read. I'll be sort of like God to them. They won't ask any questions." (192) As Reuven questions Danny about spending his life doing what he detests, Danny says again, "I have no choice. It's like a dynasty; if the son doesn't take the father's place, the dynasty falls apart. The people expect me to become their rabbi. My family has been their rabbi for six generations now. I can't just walk out on them. I'm - I'm a little trapped. I'll work it out, though- somehow." (194). This conflict causes him much distress; he is described throughout the novel as "weary" and "like a bird in pain". But at the end Danny chooses what his heart says and leaves his dynasty to become a psychologist rather than a Tzaddik or rabbi against his will. The secular world wins over the traditional world of the Jews. Danny's father Reb Saunders also understands his son's dilemma and gives his blessings to study psychology.

The traditional orthodox Jewish garb and the their facial characteristics in the novel is yet another aspect that garners contempt in other people; as Reuven points out

. . . they were dressed alike in white shirts, dark pants, white sweaters, and small black skullcaps. In the fashion of the very orthodox, their hair was closely cropped, except for the area near their ears from which mushroomed the untouched hair that tumbled down into the long side curls. Some of them had the beginnings of beards, straggly tufts of hair that stood in isolated clumps on their chins, jawbones, and upper lips. They all wore the traditional undergarment beneath their shirts, and the tzitzit, the long fringes appended to the four corners of the garment, came out above their belts and swung against their pants as they walked. These were the very Orthodox, and they obeyed literally the Biblical commandment *And ye shall look upon it*, which pertains to the fringes. (14)

Reuven's friend Mr. Savo abhors Jews for being "fanatic" on seeing Danny's peculiar way of dressing. But Reuven's state of affairs was different; though he was a Jew, his father nurtured in him both traditional values and a modern outlook to survive the secular world. Reuven's father anticipates that his son would become a mathematician but Reuven chooses to become a rabbi, in contrast to Danny's aversion to becoming a rabbi. "I sort of feel I could be more useful to people as a rabbi. To our own people, I mean. You know, not everyone is religious, like you or me. I could teach them and help them when they are in trouble. I think I would get a lot of pleasure out of that," says Reuven (70). Danny must become rabbi out of his moral obligations to his dynasty whereas Reuven aspires to become rabbi out of his desire to

educate his own folk about God. This particular novel embodies the predicament of both Danny and Reuven, pulled between their beliefs and desires; when the former chooses to disentangle himself from tradition, the latter endeavors to hold fast to his tradition.

The life of Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter has also led to their characteristic polarity in action and thought. The necessity of cultivating at least two languages (English and Yiddish), one for daily routine and synagogue prayer, and one for business correspondence and literary pursuits, demonstrated to every Jewish youth the abnormality of his national existence. The greater the discrepancy between theory and reality, the more tragic become the inner conflicts in the personality of Danny and Reuven.

How much of the secular culture can a Jew absorb without completely giving up his religion? This was the dilemma that haunted both Danny and Reuven. The question seems to be answered effortlessly by Reuven who integrated orthodox faith and American culture in his life. But Danny is not allowed to go for movies and must wear the same kind of traditional garments resembling his ancestors. At the end of the novel, however, Danny decides to slash off his earlocks, wear modern clothes, and yet still observe the Jewish commandments in the orthodox fashion as he always has done.

Interestingly, Reb Saunders, the most dogmatic character in the novel, seems to change as well. He realizes that he cannot keep Danny, with his brilliant mind, sequestered from the modern world. As he says, "This is America. This is not Europe. It is an open world here.... For a long time I have known. Let my Daniel become a psychologist. I have no more fear now. All his life he will be a Tzaddik. He will be a Tzaddik for the world. And the world needs a Tzaddik" (267). When Reb Saunders asks Danny if he will shave off his beard and cut his earlocks when he goes away to college, Danny nods 'yes'. And when Reb Saunders asks him if he will continue to observe Hasidic customs, Danny again nods. Reb Saundar trusts his son's vows to remain faithful to Hasidic customs and blesses him. Danny's studying at Columbia University for psychology and yet pledging to remain an observant Jew foreshadows that he has grown closer to the culturally balanced world of Reuven. Reuven too looks forward to becoming a rabbi, simultaneously studying mathematics. Although the novel ends without the reader having seen Danny completely immersed in his studies at Columbia, we expect Danny will thrive in the highly intellectual university environment while, at the same time respecting his father's wish to remain devoted to the Hasidic religion in which he was raised.

Both the characters outlive the discord between their conventional Jewish edicts and modern American secular thinking. They try to maintain equilibrium between these opposing ethical ideologies by bridging both by using the perspectives they offered in enduring the contemporary gentile world and the Jewish world at the same time. They succeed in merging the two divergent forces -modernity and tradition - and learn to become equally at home in both a seemingly alienated Jewish world and in the new world of contemporary America. In the words of Dalai Lama "All major religious traditions carry basically the same message, that is love, compassion and forgiveness; the important thing is they should be part of our daily lives" and both Danny and Reuven identify this basic tenet of their religion which will guide them in the new life that is awaiting them.

Therefore predicament and the suffering of Danny lies at the core of the novel. Most of his suffering pertains to his inner conflict between his ethnic identity of belonging to an alienated Jewish community and his love for the standards of modern American culture. Danny is not only born into a religion; he is born into a very demanding culture with a strict set of customs and expectations. Danny struggles to choose his life path rather than have it chosen for him. To

Danny, being chosen is especially cumbersome, because his lifestyle and education are limited by the rules of his culture. As a Hasidic Jew, he cannot choose his wife, and as a tzaddik, he cannot choose his profession but finally he makes a choice following his heart. The background against which Danny makes his decision on how much to assimilate into popular culture is the changing political and cultural situation of Jews in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Conclusion

The belief that Jews have a special relationship with God had a profound bearing on their life. The covenant at Sinai established a relationship whereby the Israelites agreed to abide by the Torah in exchange for God's protection. Put differently, if the Israelites abided by the terms of the covenant, they would be rewarded; if they abandoned them, they would be punished and suffering befalls the Jewish people as a punishment for abandoning their covenantal obligations. If one examines acutely the history of Jews, one can find most of their sufferings was the deplorable product of their post colonial experience. In his book *The Chosen*, Potok showed his mastery in exploring how the post colonial concepts which include imperialism, migration, homelessness, alienation, racism and ethnic conflict augmented the suffering of the major characters in the novel.

From the time of legendary figure Moses (1200 B C), Jews were the hunted preys of imperialism. The principal characters in the novel Reb Saunders, David Malter and their ancestors were Russian Jews (who migrated from Germany), the chief sport of imperialists Tsar government in Russia and their allies Cossacks. Saunders family including his wife and two children were slaughtered ruthlessly by the relentless fury of Cossacks. He saw his wife and children fighting for life in front of his eyes where he laid wounded as a helpless wretch. His eyes witnessed and conceived that heart-corroding suffering of his innocent wife, his son and eighteen-month old daughter who were shot to death by a gang of prowling Cossacks. From that day Saunders perceived the suffering of his race as his own and bore their burden on his shoulders. Along with followers passing through all peck of troubles both Saunders and Malter migrated to America. In short, both Saunders and Malter family's migration history begins from Palestine to Germany, from Germany to Russia, and from Russia to America. Wherever they migrated from and migrated to the underwent an crucible test for survival and shelter.

In America, though Saunders and Malter received heartily and unbiased reception, the need of a "homeland" began to bother their mind on knowing the fiery ordeal of European Jews in concentration camps and the massacre of innocent Jews by Arabs in Palestine. The creation of a "homeland" called Israel became the ultimate aim of their very existence. Through Zionist activities, Saunders worked incessantly for the establishment of Jewish state. To the delight of all homeless Jews and Malter's family, atlast United Nations agreed to the proposal of a Hebrew state and Israel sprang up as an independent democratic state on May 14, 1948. David Malter and his son Reuven Malter felt the most blitheness of their life on that auspicious day. Finally, Saunders too discovered the meaning of his brother's suffering and death a martyrdom with the establishment of a Jewish homeland.

From the above study we can assume that "Imperialism", one of the major concepts of post-colonialism, and its activities served a significant part in inflating the sufferings of the Jews in the novel *The Chosen*. The migration of Saunders and Malter's family from one country to another was their effort to escape from the callous treatment of the ruthless imperialists ruled there. And as a migrant they never received a warm treatment, they were still haunted by all

evils of suffering in the hands of imperialist rulers and their followers. The imperialistic activities of Hitler and Arabs further intensified their grave need of a ‘homeland’ and Malter inspite of his poor health struggled and suffered day and night in bringing awareness among the ignorant Jews on the importance of a “homeland”. Saunders suffered silently on the plight of European Jews and found his refuge in God. There was little left for him but to turn to their Bibles and prayer books, scanning the tear-stained pages for consolation which the living world denied them.

Jews as a different race with common ancestral origin, cultural traits, tradition, language and social patterns were always alienated from other communities. With the discovery of Aryan race supremacy over Jewish race, Hitler made up his mind to annihilate the entire Jewish race from the earth. There emerged prejudices and hatred among other groups, and Anti-Semitism (hostility towards Jews) became a prominent organisation during the Second World War. The characters Reb Saunders, David Malter and their son Danny and Reuven respectively, are petrified on listening to the news of the pandemonium created in European Jewry by Hitler and his followers. The racist attack meted out to Jews was a heart sickening episode to Saunders and Malter. The Holocaust, the systematic state-sponsored killing of six million Jewish men, women, and children and millions of others in gas chambers by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II and the greatest event of individual and communal suffering in Jewish history stirred the soul of Danny and Reuven. Though the characters never suffered physically, the events in concentration camps of Hitler had led to their emotional suffering for their people grieving in distant lands. The extermination of six million Jews due to the only fact that they belonged to a different race was horrifying to the elderly characters in the novel. Malter suffers a heart attack and Saunders wept like a woman; “I saw tears come slowly from his eyes and disappear into the tangle of the dark beard” (184) observed Reuven. Therefore racism played its part in aggravating the miseries of the characters.

Much of Jewish-American literature focuses on the tension between traditional Jewish values and modern American mores, and *The Chosen* can also be read as part of that tradition. Due to their unusual tradition and customs, Jews were alienated as “other” and modernity was an intolerable adaptation for orthodox Jews like Reb Saunders. Reb Saunders’s traditionalist mindset is stubborn and parochial. For most part of the novel, he is unwilling to engage the outside world or interpret Judaism in ways other than his own. But with his activism and scientific approach to Talmudic study, David Malter represents Potok’s ideal of the modern American Jew. He manages to fuse a traditional sense of devotion and spirituality with a commitment to the larger world around him. He never allows his family to be ‘alienated’ from the secular world of America by their staunch faith on Jewish tradition. Both Danny and Reuven also fulfill their duty by studying Jewish liturgy, and they derive great pleasure from Jewish traditions. But at the same time, both protagonists feel the burden of being Jewish—the burden of being a member of a persecuted and alienated minority. Reuven is saddened by the loss of lives during the Holocaust, and Danny struggles and suffers with the Hasidic tradition he was born into. Danny wants to break away from his alienated Jewish world and go in search of “pastures new.” He suffers between his personal obligation to become the leader of Hasidic Jewish community and his desire to become a psychologist. But finally, he chooses to move from his alienated world to the modern secular world of America. He shuns the possibility of being taunted by other Americans by cutting off his ear locks and shaving his beard, a physical attribute of his tradition and joins Columbia University.

Therefore it is evident that the post colonial concepts of Racism and Modernity which blot Jews as an “alienated species” function as an imperial element in the novel *The Chosen*. Jews identified as an inferior race to Aryan race suffer racist attack from morons like Hitler. The central characters in the novel are bewildered at this uneven treatment to their folk. At this instance one think of the famous dialogue uttered by the Jewish character Shylock in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*; (Act III Scene 1, lines 58-69)

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.

The characters suffer their foredoomed fate as an alienated cluster searching for an identity among the human beings. They wonder, are they not like human beings with all senses and why are they ordained to suffer a beastly death in Hitler’s gas chambers. The steadfast faith and tradition of orthodox Jews like Reb Saunders, which keeps them away from civilisation and participation in modern world is yet another reason for the suffering of younger generation of Jews like Danny Saunders who was born and brought up in America. Danny Saunders undergoes tremendous emotional trauma to be a part of an alienated Jewish community, at the same time pursuing his thirst for knowledge of secular world. This discrepancy between his ethnic tradition and modernity of the outer world, accounts for most of the suffering endured by Danny. Thus suffering owing to migration and homelessness due to the impact of imperialism, and racism and modernity as the outcome of alienation dominates the life of major characters helping them to develop and mature as they learn important truths about the world around them and about themselves in the novel *The Chosen*. Suffering is a general motif in Jewish tradition and literature, and its full significance within *The Chosen* becomes more apparent as the novel progresses where the characters perceive and live their lives through suffering and tolerance.

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