

## Symbols and Images as a Positive Force in Reclaiming Jewish Identity in Dara Horn's *In The Image*

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**Abstract**

Each and every culture has its own beliefs, practices, ideas, customs and symbols. One active way of remembering the past is through the practice of rituals and following the traditions. Dara Horn in her novel *In The Image* presents ancient Jewish history in the light of contemporary American Jewish life and explores the Jewish past as well as the Jewish present. This paper focuses how the ancient images and symbols which are the essential substance for the existence of the Jewish present tradition help them to reclaim their identity.

**Keywords:** Dara Horn, *In The Image*, Jewish, History, Identity

Culture is more than sum of the customs and beliefs through which it is recognized in a distinct way of life. It is a medium through which people of divergent personalities are tied together through a collective belonging to something greater than themselves. As a social and communal adhesive of sorts, a given culture fosters a sense of kinship amongst people through a common connection to language, customs, and a shared past. According to Thiong'o, "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of

values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture....” (16).

In search of roots and restoring the old values are essential in a young Jew’s life. The Jews like to know about their historical past, as they are the people who face abomination and violence all over the world and chased away by most people. Whitfield states that, “the claims of the past were not utterly abandoned” (376). Leora, a 17-year-old Jewish New Jerseyite who is interested in her ancient Jewish history is in search of her roots. She learns Yiddish, language of a modern Jew and likes to explore the primordial places. She visits Jewish historical sites in Spain where she has immersed herself in hundreds of years of history. She is very much influenced by what she has seen and feels about the places and the people. She thinks her as a medium of source through which she shares her beautiful experiences about the ancient places to the very old community where she belongs.

According to Prince, “A true Jew, in addition to be a Jew by birth, or conversion, must have the inner condition of heart that earns him or her the praise of God” (21). Belonging to the intangible culture which contains folklore, traditions, language and natural heritage which are inherited from the ancient past and maintained in the present with fervent texture, Leora’s family follow the traditional way of prayer and a special Friday night dinner in honor of sabbath. They lit candles and recite blessings over the candles, sing the prayers and sit together and sing songs in honor of the day, reciting the grace after meals in Hebrew, “exactly like in those old Jewish folktales” (56). This practice is the symbol of maintaining their natural heritage and faith which they have inherited from the past, maintaining it in the present and preserve it for the future generations. Even though they live in a space which contains various identifications along with the supreme American culture, still they cling to their own beliefs and traditional values. Leora identifies her father as a person who wears tefillin during morning prayers. This tefillin is a symbol that shows their faith in their religion and God which signifies that they still follow the word of God. The tefillin in their arm and on their foreheads reveal that they bind themselves with the transcendent and eternal God and their traditional beliefs.

The bitterness of exile and waiting for redemption are painful experiences in the life of the Jewish people. Working as a journalist Leora happens to see the Tefillin in random accessories, a shop that sells antique collections. It invokes the memories of the story shared by her former lover Jason about Rosenthal and other discriminated Jews who travels from Europe to America in a ship which reveals the painful experience of the journey and the pitiable condition of the Jews. During 1920s and 30s anti Semitism is common in Europe. In many places Jews have been living in concentrated camps. The modern ghettos of Nazis change into a place where

Jews face execution, torture and death. They are slaughtered mercilessly. Racial abomination and the blind rage turn the Jews into a small dissolving community.

To escape from the slaughter the Jews started to migrate to America. Rosenthal reveals the suffocating memory of the journey as they travel as packed in hundreds, without ventilation. The Jews get frustrated because they face expulsion, persecution and enslavement. Their anguished cry makes them to shed away their past and are ready to give up their culture and ethnic identity. To get rid of their past identity many Jews throw their Tefillin into the sea. They do not want to trap themselves again in their old traditional ways and old-world culture which cause them so much pain and suffering. The first-generation immigrants let go off the past and adapt the new culture with an open heart. It is not only the tefillin they discard but also, they discard their culture, language, ritual and their past history. Here throwing away the ritual object tefillin signifies the shedding of their painful past.

Survival is the basic necessity of every human being. The Jews are in search of a new space. They negotiate the boundaries, spread their wings and fly to new places to survive. Wherever they go they face discrimination, violence, economic exploitation, deprivations and ghetto conditions. In America's industrial cities where clock fixing is common, the entire Jewish family has to work for hours in factories to survive. Leah, an Austro Hungarian, comes as an immigrant to America to survive. She enters into America to build a happy and peaceful life. She comes from a town south of Kiev, a land of woods and works in a sewing factory in America. Leah's marriage with David, a Hebrew scholar ends in the very first day as he shows his cruel nature. By the force of law and afraid of excommunication David grants Leah divorce. Leah's life starts to change when she speaks to Aaron, the factory clerk. They fall in love but her parents refused her to marry Aaron because he is a Cohen, descendant of the high priest. According to Jewish traditional law a divorced woman cannot marry a member of the priestly class. For a Jew, religious law is more important than his or her personal demands. Even though Leah's family is in the midst of the boiling cauldron of multiethnic and multilingual America they still decide to follow their religious law given by God. Leah's disappointment makes her to get angry over the ancient law which takes away her happiness. Aaron and Leah get married in the factory without the knowledge of others but soon darkness engulfed Leah's life in the form of Aaron's death as Aaron died in the boarding house fire. Leah mourned for Aaron and plans to go back to her home country. She returns to her homeland in a ship from New York harbor. When the ship passes under the Statue of Liberty, she takes the box that her father has given her and throws her father's Tefillin in the ocean with bitterness. For Leah tradition and rituals are the one which rip her apart from her happy family life with Aaron. She thinks it as a curse which uproots her life and turns into a more miserable one.

The history of holocaust brings torment, distress and anguish. Leora reflects about the change that occurs in the life of the immigrant Jewish people and the change in their names. To join in the land of the free and the home of the brave and to escape from racial atrocities they discard their old names and change their names which help them to fit in the vast American culture. They are afraid to expose themselves as Jews because of the fear of the loss in their social position and status. Even though they remain as a Jew in their life they do not want to stamp themselves into the old-world religious identity with religious names. But changes occur in the life of Jason, a young Jew as he adapts Hassidism and renames as Yehudah, a dried-out name, a name once discarded by the Jewish people who enter into the mainstream American culture as immigrants. Now the modern Jew, Jason wants to use it so he takes it back and gives life to that name. When Jason is being called as Yehudah by his wife Rivka, Leora is surprised to hear and see the fierce loyalty of Jason towards Judaism. From a self-hating Jew, a Jew who feels very uncomfortable around religious Jews, a soccer player who has adopted modern American culture during his college days has now changed completely into a Hassidic. Ezrahi points out, “Jews have always used in self-defence, that of barricading themselves behind a wall of Torah and fighting the next round with God” (121).

Memory is the process of maintaining information over time. Jews are the holders of longest and most tenacious of memories. The color of the Jewish past remains unchanged in their life because of the unforgettable painful memory. The images of the past history affect the memory of the Jews and bring them a new experience. Leora’s visit to Amsterdam and the Rijks museum evokes the memory of her ancestral past. She is amazed by the paintings of Rembrandt, a Dutch artist, who paints scenes from the Bible which everyone regards as his greatest creative triumphs. Rembrandt uses the models of Jewish quarter in his paintings because he believes that they resemble close to the biblical scenes and characters. When Leora sees the paintings of Rembrandt and the name Titus in the Rijks Museum she could not resist the thought of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews in Europe. She also sees the painting of Prophet Jeremiah mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem. She opines:

The prophet Jeremiah mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem. A weighty title, not at all fitting for the delicate pain of that painting, the darkness encroaching on the timid patch of light, the pressure of the prophets cheek against his palm, the shrouded eyes with their white brows that quivered as they fought back tears, the thin veins stretching beneath the translucent, baggy skin of the single bare foot. (122)

The pain in the face of the prophet affects Leora’s mind. It brings the memories of her people’s struggle, captivation and exile during the period of King Zedekiah. She remembers the

wrath of God that has befallen on her people. The painting invokes the memory of destruction, of their rich culture, their colorful tradition and their intellectual accomplishments. By seeing the image of the prophet, she is haunted by the memory of Jewish up-rootedness, dispersal and wandering. The images in the paintings are the symbol of destruction of lost culture and values.

The Hebrew word for symbol is 'ot', which denotes not only a sign, but also a visible religious token of the relation between God and man. When Leora sees the water logged tefillin, the property of an immigrant Jew, she yearns to reclaim it. She does not want to shed her ancestral past. Leora wants to reclaim the lost values and objects which she considers as their lost symbols. It is a symbol which connects her with the rich historical past. When her lover Jake presents her with the same tefillin which retrieves from the New York harbor, it renews the life of Jake and Leora and connects them with their mythical past. By retrieving the symbolic object Jake and Leora honor their ancient past and the word of God.

The memory of the tragic events and the natural pull towards her religion and tradition shapes Leora to maintain the Jewishness. The inhuman persecution of the Jewish people and the troubled history in the paintings at the Rijks Museum connects her with the memories of her ancestors. It prompts her effectively in the revitalization of Jewish life. The paintings of the ancient days ie, biblical days of Israelites during the days of destruction and exile help Leora and her partner Jake to realize and understand their ancestors' painful past. The call of the ritual object tefillin thrown by the first-generation immigrants makes her reclaim the object to maintain her identity. As Nochlin says, "the passing down of Jewish wisdom from one generation to another seems an honorable and praiseworthy practice" (16). Jake and Leora shape their life by what they make of their experiences and memories. As for Leora and Jake reclaiming the relics is a symbol of reclaiming their Jewishness. The future of Judaism bounds up in remembering the past and following the rituals. The understanding of Jewish law and rituals helps the younger generation to embrace their religion and tradition with passion.

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