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Writing the 'Rabbi': Erasing Ideology—A Reading of Stanley Elkin's *The Rabbi of Lud*

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I

To understand the ideology game in a text, perhaps the reader herself is required to take a position, irrespective of whether she is conscious of it or not. Taking a position would mean, deciphering the 'ethical moment' in a text, which is neither cognitive, nor political, nor interpersonal but *properly and independently ethical*. It is this ethical moment of a text which during the process of reading, enters into the social, institutional and political realms. The reader's position becomes an ethical or ideological one, from the concrete situation of reading a text which awakens a 'responsibility', or 'a set of ideas' in the mind of the reader. These set of ideas interrupt the context of the life-world represented in the text and the reader is tempted to read *against* what is *said* in the text to remain faithful to what the text says. One must understand that every text is the subject of a law where life negates itself only to affirm itself more firmly. In other words, every text has a life-world which differs from itself, defers itself and operates itself as *differance*. Therefore, to understand the complex relationship of the reader to an

ideologically constructed text one must surely address oneself to one of the Levinasian problems—"how is the text to be read so as to preserve its ethical saying." (Critchley, 1992 : 48)

The construction of the Jewish-American text, also involves an 'ethical-moment' which might be traced back to a wounded attachment, a breach, a hurt produced out of the existential and ideological relations of the conflicting nature of a diasporic society like America. The Jewish-American text derives its roots in the problematique of Jewish-identity inscribed in definition of a 'Jew' as both a reluctant adherent and an ardent devotee. Justice Brandeis had suggested that the definition and solution of the 'Jewish problem' lies in developing "in each generation of Jews in America, the sense of noblesse oblige" (Mason 1946: 448-449), which would mean furthering the ideals of the Jewish Renaissance. The Jewish-American protagonist attempts to create a 'space' that operates as an aporia in the text and attempts at self definition as an unconscious votary of the Jewish Renaissance. Whether he succeeds in doing so or enters into a greater problem of self identity would be seen here in the course of reading Stanley Elkin's text.

The Jewish-American novels, in general, paints a unique paradigm for explaining the operation of ideological and counter-ideological currents, against the backdrop of the American dream of "boom and amplitude" (Elkin 1987: 10)* This clue of reading provided by the author himself provides an interpretive backdrop. The ideology, as it appears in the text of Stanley Elkin especially in *The Rabbi of Lud*, seems to be an ideology of *differa'nce*. (Derrida 1981: 26)¹ The Jews are different from the rest of the world in their tradition of suffering and exile and this difference has become both a burden and a weapon of resistance for them. The position of the Jewish-American is the very ambiguous because each time an attempt is made to claim a new identity by fusing the Yiddish and the American culture together, *a unified identity refuses to be formed*. This is how the Jewish-

* All further references to the text are indicated by page numbers only

American identity becomes an endless play of 'writing' and 'erasure' in the Derridean sense, where every attempt to 'write' ones identity becomes an 'erasure' of it. This complex play within the Jewish-American identity gives birth to a system of ideas which *resists* (any imposition from outside) *differs* (from the dominant American culture) and *defers* (the construction an unified identity) giving birth to an ideology of *differance*.

In the Jewish 'tradition', "only that which is written gives me existence by naming me" (Derrida, 1978 : 70).² 'Rabbi' is a identity emerged in writing 'Rabbi of the Lud' without which 'Rabbi' is without a text, the most persistent affirmation of which takes its root in the wound produced in writing:

Signifying absence or separation, the letter lives as aphorism. It is solitude, articulates solitude and lives on solitude. It would no longer be letter of the law if it were outside difference, or if it left its solitude, or put an end to interruption, to distance, to respect, and to its relation to the other, that is, a certain non relation.

(Derrida, *Ibid* : 72).

Therefore, writing produces a difference between the 'text' and the 'world', the living and the dead, the experience and the reality and this difference is what adduces signification to the 'text' written and the signification erases the difference. Writing become an erasure when it 'signifies' and when it 'signifies', it produces difference. Writing breaks the 'singularity':

The Jew is split, and split first of all between the two dimensions of the letter: allegory and literality. His history would be but one empirical history among others if he established or nationalized himself within difference and literality. (Derrida, *Ibid*: 75).

In a diasporic American society, the complex existential and ideological relations in which a Jewish text is produced inscribe a wounded attachment or breach within, a breach that interrupts an otherwise linear progression towards the other, or coexistence with the other. The breach is initiated in the radical alterity of the Jewish identity from its 'other.'

This is seemingly the most plausible location of breach in the formation of Jewish identity.

II

Stanley Elkin can be placed with the novelists of the sixties like E.L. Doctorow and Robert Coover who were introspective, hyperrealistic and surrealistic almost across the border of fantasy, which made them interrogators of reality. Reality of the horror and grossness of the history of migrancy and diaspora is represented through a fragmented reportage to interrogate the reality that denies order and harmony. Elkin says in one place in *The Rabbi of Lud*,

What did I say 'realities'? I mean realtors, but face it. its realities we're really talking about here, isn't it? (p. 188)

Elkin's *The Rabbi of Lud* is a text woven out of historical landscapes and diasporic experiences but as the text develops, the historical references get weakened and the narrative suddenly gets fragmented, creating gaps, fissures and silences within the text. These gaps are the inter-textual spaces in the text where both the reader and the author emerge to identify their own ideological subject positions. Elkin's protagonist is no votary of the American dream of success like Miller's Loman. He is just Jerry Goldkorn 'the Rabbi of Lud.' a self-referential entity. His only strength seems to be that he has been able to fix his subject position as the 'Rabbi' and is capable of narrating individual and collective experiences through various layers of visible and invisible history.

His narrative voice designates him the position of a speaking subject in the emergence, who can appropriate the current of the dominant ideology but only at the individual level. Terry Eagleton (Eagleton: 1991: 42) observes, drawing on Althusser's concept of ideology that ideology (of the dominant group) singles out social subjects to deny them their collective strength. In *The Rabbi of Lud*, the 'Rabbi' as an isolated individual of an exiled community is a social and spiritual wanderer. So the text becomes an individual subject's unsystematic representation of 'a system of ideas' which springs from his own lived experience of power. In this sense the Jewish-American text is a meta-text of the

sufferings of an exiled community. It is the reader, who makes a hermeneutical narratological interpretation of the meta-text by deciphering the gaps and silences of the text, to trace the operation of ideological and counter ideological processes. A deconstructive reading of the text does not allow the author the position of an ideologue, even though the author turns self-referential. Elkin's way of looking at and interpreting the ways of living in the world only provides for certain traces of 'ideologeme,' and thereby a meta narrative where one could locate the site/sight for resistance to social, cultural and political oppression. The act of reading becomes a simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of "the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes" (Jameson 1981: 78). A reconstruction of the traces of the ideologeme involves a mapping of what Foucault calls a 'set of discourses' in the text that discriminates one form of social life from the other. Elkin describes 'Lud' as:

(...) terrain where two opposing civilizations came to grips just the sort of undistinguished insignificant but bloodied parcel where the battle park goes or historic field where important papers were signed (p.1)

From this one understands that Lud is not just a piece of land but a 'landscape', a metaphor of two conflicting 'set of discourses' articulating a relational phenomenon, where to redescribe Poulantzas' language (Poulantzas 1973: ch 2), "one class is seen to live its conditions of existence in relation to another class." This relational phenomenon can be better understood from the realm of everyday life, which is actually the meta-fictional space for locating the individual's life within the power structure. Jerry Goldkorn's child narrates her everyday experience, which poignantly sums up the position of the younger generations of Jewish Americans, she says:

Well may be I am afraid of Lud, may be I am. May be I am bothered by having only dead people for neighbours like my father thinks, or hurt because kids won't play with me, who won't even visit (...)
(p. 193).

It appears from this that even a child of an ambiguous identity is typically defined not by the cultural constructs to which she is connected, but by the multiple categories from which she is excluded. Subjected to silence, exclusion and rejection such a subject is inevitably the 'other'. And so such a subject is to be fixed by the 'other' discourse which constitutes it. Eagleton states that ideology is a matter of discourse having "certain concrete discursive effects" (Eagleton 1991: 223) which constitutes a representation of the points where power manifests itself through certain utterance and inscription. Elkin's text is pregnant with utterances like:

(...) a Jew buried was a jew nailed (and who probably thought jew in lower case, and if it were a verb or adjective, and once remarked in my hearing that the pebbles and stones people placed on Jew gravestones was not a kind of calling card, or for resemblance. It was the extra weight, to keep them down in the earth (P. 52).

The hermeneutics of the bracketed lines here are more poignant because they constitute an expression of the Rabbi's "hidden transcripts" which is a symbolic ideology of resistance and which is a "discourse that takes place 'offstage' beyond direct observation by powerholders." (Scott : 1990 : 4).

'Hidden transcripts' become the most effective means of appropriation because power has been inscribed on the body and senses of a Jewish-American. Under such circumstances, direct confrontation with the dominant discourse is not possible. One uses even one's sense organs to the extent that it does not cross the boundary set by the ruling ideology. Elkin's Rabbi says:

(Jews may place no hearing aid in their ears that corrects hearing acuity beyond what is considered normal in the population as a whole) (p. 57).

Most of the effective statements in Elkin's text are written within brackets, which indicates that the Rabbi's speech is only a bracketed speech, which further indicates that his identity is a bracketed one. To bracket a discourse is to

close down or limit experience to a definite texture of the 'novel'. This also shows how the narrative voice is enforced with limits and how the narrator speaks the unspeakable while what is spoken remains unspoken without being given space for its free expression. One can say that the voice of the narrator is exiled and interned, demonstrating how dominant ideology allows an expression within its designated interior, the agency of the narrator being besieged.

In such a text of diasporic experiences and suffering location of the ideological position of the institution of religion can provide another example of the disempowerment of Jewish identities. In the context of New Jersey, the Rabbi says that the religion of the Americans does not accommodate a Jew although the 'son of God' who was crucified on the cross for mankind is of Jewish origin. The Rabbi says:

Look, a Jew isn't a Christian. Jesus says, "Follow me" and the church makes a big thing out of the imitation of Christ. Not by us. On an individual level, by us there's a real distinction between church and State. (p. 6)

The cruel God of New Jersey does not accept the Jews because they do not have the 'numbers'. Christianity is a religion of the majority in the set-up of New Jersey. The Rabbi voices his protest against such a religion of numbers:

it's not numbers alone that make great religion, ideas have something to say about it too is that Christianity has heavier holidays. (p. 165)

Christianity, by turning itself into the religion of the majority articulates the politics of exclusion and is therefore instrumental in translating the American dream of "boom and amplitude". As a 'set of ideas' for promoting the welfare of the ruling class. Christianity tries to erase the 'other' religion. Elkin says

its' always one belief looking to take over another belief/ (p. 207).

According to Elkin's Rabbi.

God is no humanist, no one worlder, and is hostile to the very concept of brotherhood (p. 58)

It appears that, even God is not interested to end the hostility between the two civilizations of New Jersey. His discontent with the role of God in perpetrating the ideology of the ruling race makes him believe that,

God forbid. Himself had died. (p. 6)

God is also an ideological construct, as the Rabbi says:

He's this man's man God (p.65)

While studying the play of ideological and counter-ideological currents in the Jewish-American novel, one observes that the point of interaction of the two contradictory discourses creates an inter-textual space. The speaking subject in its emergence locates his/her subject position in that space and articulates his/her views on a number of issues existing within the power structure of the society. In *The Rabbi of Lud*, Jerry locates his subject position as the Rabbi, speaking in his rabbi mode on a number of subjects, knowing for sure that to speak in the Rabbi mode, or anybody's mode is to exist in "the UFO condition" (p. 127). This would perhaps explain the problem of identity of individual of a marginalised community. The metaphor of 'writing' and 'erasure' as used in the title refers to an attempt to write an identity which ironically results in writing Nothing. It is a problem of essence and existence. While the rabbi is not able to fix his identity, his daughter is afraid of losing the identity which she thinks she has. She says "When I marry there'll be no more Goldkorn" (p. 184). Jerry's daughter Connie is at least able to assume that she has an identity, which she is afraid to lose while Jerry fails to construct a unified identity for himself. Sometimes he attempts to counter the "ideology of numbers" by projecting the population of his community. He is pleased to believe, as he says:

The earth drowned Jews of Lud-New Jersey. Our Crowd. How did there get to be so many? (p.9).

If to expand in numbers means assertion of one's identity, Jerry while expressing his indictment for the 'religion of numbers' himself subscribes to the same and falls within the 'hermeneutic circle'. This is how a system of ideas evolve having contradictory elements within it, which when

brought under a functioning relationship, generates the traces of 'ideologeme'. Jerry seems to attempt to construct a unified self through a series of disconnected image and activities of everyday life, filling the space between his essence and existence. His real world is a grotesque world of machines and computers, which has for its objective only material comfort and material success. But Jerry, while having his footing in such a world, imagines an ideal world where the Jews are able to achieve the peace of the promised land and Christians are able to imitate Christ adequately. This imaginary relationship of Jerry to his "real conditions of existence," as represented by him is what Althusser calls an ideology. (Althusser 1971: 152). The various institutions of 'hegemony' in the capitalist world marginalizes an individual and does not allow a subjecthood to be formed. This marginalization becomes more acute with the differentiation of life into autonomous sphere as private and public, secular and spiritual and this distorts the unified vision of life. Michel de Certeau (Certeau 1984 : 6) points out that the demarcation and designation of 'proper' places does not simply differentiate one form of life from the other, but it also leaves the realm of everyday life as a remainder, which is the real site for locating the subject in his lived experience of power. Althusser believes that ideology (of the dominant class) interpellates individuals as subjects, and this interpellation can be studied from the 'other' discourse which the subject-in-the emergence articulates. To construct and assert his subject position Jerry tries to 'write' his selfhood, which ironically gets erased in his process of writing it. What remains is a 'trace' of an emerging subject, a Rabbi who is reciting some special blessing he had learned in *yesheva*:

I offered the brochures you say when you see a rainbow, when you eat a ripe fruit, when you hear good news, when you laugh out loud, when you buy new clothes, when you kiss a woman, when you repair an appliance, when you touch a giant, when you smell sweet wood (P. 274).

Jerry's attempt to 'write' his identity as the 'Rabbi' actually becomes an ideological involvement as it involves a

confrontation with the dominant ideology in the realm of everyday life through a series of everyday activities. This 'writing' of Rabbi again involves double erasure. The 'Rabbi' tries to write his own identity by erasing the currents of the dominant ideology but is himself erased in the process of 'writing' as he fails to construct an unified 'self' or constitute a subjecthood. His text, by ending in an incomplete note, becomes a meta-narrative of the paradox of the ideology game, which is a *differa'nce*.

What emerges out of the 'ideology game' is only a trace of the 'Rabbi', who has tried to 'write' himself by erasing the dominant 'other'. However, this 'trace' is not an absence of the 'Rabbi' or complete erasure of the self, as Derrida says:

The erasure of the selfhood of one's own presence, and is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance of the disappearance of it's disappearance. An unerasable trace is not a trace, it is a full presence (Derrida, *Ibid*: 229).

The evolution of the trace is the outcome of the game of ideological and counter-ideological discourse of the text, which becomes a meta-fictional space to locate individual and collective suffering. Within this meta-fictional space it is interesting to note how the woman lives in an "internal exile" amidst the ambiguous politics of inclusion and exclusion. One is surprised to note that Shelley, Jerry's wife is practically a non-entity in the text. She is not even a semi-subject in the text. The Rabbi represents her only with her body, which is another differentiated space to locate oppression of mute entities who are living in the world of the 'boom and amplitude.' Although "Three of the ten Commandments relate directly to family." (p. 56), family life in New Jersey is actually a past pathological affair. (p. 20). How can God do justice to the mute object, when he himself is a part of the corrupt marginalization. Jerry says :

(...) Shelley's figure, even now at thirty-seven makes me think that the Creator has got to be at least part pornographer (...) (p. 21).

To Jerry, it is not a womanly beauty which Shelley has been created with, but sheer pornography. A woman while

being a victim of the capitalist world of "boom and amplitude" is also marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order and so she is even more oppressed than her husband Jerry. The Rabbi by representing her position, is actually expressing his indictment for such a society where women are not preservers of generations as Bernard Shaw believed or partners to the American dream. They are the most vulnerable objects with their body, where power is inscribed more acutely.

This is how an attempt is made to erase the dominant ideology and write one's own 'identity' which again is erased in the process of writing. The reader deconstructs the 'ethical moments' to the text to locate his own subject position in the text while trying to trace the ideology of the writer who is an ideological presence in his absence.

Notes

1. According to Derrida, *differance* sees meaning as permanently deferred, always subject to and produced by its difference from other meaning and thus volatile and unstable. Here in this paper, the word is also used to indicate the difference and deferment in the construction of a subject.
2. Derrida translates the word *écriture* by the English word 'writing.' Erasure would mean crossed out but not removed.

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