

Diasporic Destinations and Gender Relations: The Construction of Jewish Identities in Contemporary British and Canadian Narratives in English

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The dissertation project aims to conduct a comparative study of British-Jewish and Canadian-Jewish writing emphasizing works published since the 1980's by authors either born or based in Britain and Canada. The purpose of this study is to explore the negotiation of Jewish identity and culture in contemporary narratives in English from the countries that currently grapple with the challenges of post-colonial existence in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies. The goals of the project are to hear and explore the distinct Jewish voice rising from within the cultural polyphonies of Britain and Canada, try to define its features, as well as, trace the meaning of hyphenation, making both cultural contexts simultaneously separated and unified by a hyphen equally valid and endlessly interconnected.

The paradoxical and conflicting nature of Jewish identity rooting itself in the religion of Judaism, which has ceased to be the core of Jewish self-determination owing largely to the processes of secularization and the establishment of the state of Israel, is intensified in the post-Holocaust world and continues to occupy a central position in the ongoing debate about the meaning and legacy of Jewishness. The literary works of both British-Jewish and Canadian-Jewish authors address the issue of identity and create protagonists, whose gaze is inevitably turned to the tragedies of the European past, but who simultaneously attempt to give meaning to the Jewish existence in present-day British and Canadian societies. To compare the contemporary waves of Jewish writing in both countries, I employ concepts and ideas produced within the framework of post-colonial theory concentrating on questions of identity politics and interconnectedness of cultures and communities facing involuntary displacement.

I intend to look at the ways in which protagonists define their existence, gender relations within Orthodox and reformist Jewish communities and at the images of Britain, Canada and Israel created in both literary contexts. A discussion of the place of religion and tradition in contemporary Jewish life becomes an integral part of Jewish writing from Britain and Canada. Judaism remains a strong influence for Jewish experience. However, the works in question reevaluate and rewrite Jewish religious texts and mythologies and describe protagonists' individual spiritual practices inside and outside the synagogue. Intolerance, harsh patriarchal structures, preserved by Orthodox communities and hypocrisy of their leaders, are frequently put into display and criticized. Further research using current feminist and gender theories will aim to uncover the ways in which female protagonists reclaim spirituality and struggle to reshape, rather than merely reject, Orthodox Jewish tradition.

The marginal status of British-Jewish and Canadian-Jewish writing on the local and global literary scene allows me to assume the significance of this project, which addresses those vital questions of contact between cultures, negotiation of identities and contemporary challenges to tradition and targets literary works that remain outside the mainstream.