

CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND THE RUSSIAN-AMERICAN (CON) TEXT: A STUDY OF GARY SHTEYNGART'S LITTLE FAILURE

<http://ijrs.online/ijrs/index.php/journal-archives/published-volumes/volume-2-2020/details/2/26> 



Ayushman Devraj

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English,
The Assam Royal Global University,
Guwahati
PhD Research Scholar, Gauhati University
ayushman@hotmail.co.in

Abstract: Since the 1970's to the end of the twentieth century, America witnessed a colossal exodus of Russian citizens to its soil, especially, people belonging to the Jewish faith. Due to the harsh anti-Semitic policies of the then Communist regime of Soviet Russia, many Russian Jews immigrated to various countries, chiefly, to Israel, Germany, the United States, and a few European nations. Of them all, a vast majority of the immigrants made America their preferred home for resettlement. Gary Shteyngart belongs to one such immigrant family. As a representative of the younger generation of Russian-American novelists, Shteyngart, like his third-wave émigré predecessor Joseph Brodsky, registers his immigrant experiences in English. His writings, predominantly fiction, explores the Jewish immigrant experience in the United States – which is one of the major centres of resettlement for the Soviet-Jews. This paper aims to investigate the wide-ranging issues of cultural hybridity, identity, and the hurdles in assimilation as featured in Shteyngart's memoir *Little Failure* (2014). The paper shall focus on Russian related themes depicted in his work, such as, hardships caused due to displacement, problems in assimilation and acceptance in a foreign land, questions of identity, to name a few. Shteyngart skilfully interplays the Russian and American elements back-and-forth in his works, thereby pioneering a new style of English literary landscape, abundant with Russian words and phrases, which is neither Russian nor American – but just like Shteyngart a pure hybrid: Russian-American.

Keywords: Hybridity, Immigration, Jewish, Identity, Nostalgia



Kandarpa Das

Vice-Chancellor,
Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open
University, Guwahati
Professor (on lien), Gauhati University
kandarpagu@gmail.com

(I)

Contemporary Russian-American literature came into existence in 2002, with the publication of Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. Shteyngart was soon followed by a host of other writers. In the last two decades, Russian-American writers, that is – Russians belonging to the Jewish faith who immigrated to America – soon established themselves as potent voices through their works in the immigrant literary landscape, thereby not

only bringing reader accolades but critical acclaim as well. Most writers from the group live in the North American continent (US and Canada) and writes in English – a language which they adopted upon arriving in the US, and currently are adept in it. Their works are chiefly marked with themes relating to Russia, repercussions of immigration, and the hyphenated identities they are encompassed with. Their works are predominantly set in (Soviet)Russia and/or Russia and the US, where the primary struggle of the characters, who are mostly immigrants, is to engage in a never-ending negotiation with their bilingual and bicultural identities. Some critics also argue about a third marker of identity, as most of these immigrants are Jewish, and thereby forms a tricultural¹ identity. This is highly suggestive in their works, which bursts of words, language, and themes, which are neither Russian nor American, but just like the writers, a unique hybrid: Russian-American.

With the increasingly number of scholarly works in English by Jewish immigrant writers, one term from post-colonial theory-hybridity-seems to be great relevance. Borrowing from the ideas put forwarded by Homi Bhabha, critic Yelena Furman in her essay "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts: Embracing The Hyphen In Russian-American Fiction" suggests the following about immigrant writers - "these writers inhabit a 'third space' in which those terms form a hybridized Russian- American immigrant identity" (Furman, 2011 p. 23). Thus one can say that this hybridity is facilitated by a point of assembly between two equal halves – one native and one adopted.

(II)

The aim of this paper is not to survey the contemporary Russian-American literary scene in its entirety, but to present one of its most dominant and popular exponent, who as of this day has published four full length novels, one non-fiction, and hundreds of essays and articles in collected volumes and newspapers worldwide, a man who is almost synonymous to contemporary Russian-American literature, Gary Shteyngart. For the purpose of this study, we shall analyse Shteyngart's 2014 memoir *Little Failure* which archives the writer's first seven years in Soviet Russia, the family's shift to the US, and his life in America. Shteyngart, who calls *Little Failure* a memoir, is a coming of the age story – a bildungsroman of sorts – where he chronicles his stay in New York City (a place he is extremely fond of; to which he dedicates one of his previous novels, *Absurdistan*). In her review of *Little Failure* in *The Washington Post* Lisa Zeidner writes, "His touching, insightful memoir... [is] an astute examination of the immigrant experience, especially that of Eastern European Jews" (Zeidner, 2014).

Writing plays a major role in Shteyngart's life. It is through writing that he discovers the idiosyncrasies of immigrant life and finally comes in terms with the hybrid nature of his identity. Loosely set between his year of birth, 1972, and 2011, when his family takes a trip back to Russia "for a week of fresh pie and remembrance" (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 394), *Little Failure* is a survey of Shteyngart's familial relationships, mostly between himself and his parents, his

1 For the purpose of this study, instead of referring to them as "Russian-American-Jewish", we shall call them "Russian-Americans". The former terminology may seem comprehensive, but upon critical reflection it proves to be redundant, perhaps due to the fact that Russian-American identity is a result of a long history of Jewish immigration to the US, and the writers in the discussion are part of its third and fourth wave. The Jewish identity, which is core to their literary and creative impetus, is already embedded in the "Russian-American" terminology.

coming of terms with his Russian, Jewish and the recently acquired American identity in the US; and most importantly Shteyngart finding a voice of his own and projecting it through his writing. Shteyngart dedicates *Little Failure* to his parents, but it was his grandmother instilled in him a desire to write when he was still wet behind his ears, by rewarding him with a piece of cheese after writing a page full of story. For Shteyngart, writing was the only positive constant throughout his life and helped him sail turbulent water without difficulty. "Like the protagonists of his novels, Shteyngart presents himself as a social and cultural outsider, for whom writing refuge from a hostile environment and the one positive constant throughout his life" (Furman, 2015, p. 117).

Gary Shteyngart is undoubtedly the most popular Russian-American writer active today and hence the title *Little Failure* seems a little farfetched and self-ironical. The events depicted in the book more or less portrays Shteyngart's life in a chronological order - the book begins with his birth and childhood in Leningrad and ends with his emergence as a successful writer in the US - and the immigration to the US via Austria and Italy, his education in Queens and Manhattan, his stay in Oberlin College all merged in between. One of the recurring themes of the book is his love-hate relationship with his parents, who are borderline abusive, and are highly condemning and disapproving of Shteyngart's decision to become a writer. His parents wanted him to become a lawyer and fulfil the American Dream of being rich, successful, and affluent. But upon realising that their son wanted to pursue a career in writing (a profession that hardly paid and the chances of making big was extremely low), they were filled with consternation. His mother called him "Failurchka" (a fusion of Russian and English) which meant "Little Failure" (the phrase that lent the title of the memoir) - a condescending Russian-American nickname, while his father called him "Soplyak" (snotty). Even after establishing himself as a successful writer, Shteyngart fails to impress his parents, "I read on the Russian Internet that you and your novels will soon be forgotten" (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 45).

For Shteyngart, one of the early challenges in assimilation came during his stay at Solomon Schechter School in Queens, a conservative Hebrew day school. At Schechter School he had to de-familiarise himself with not just one but two alien languages - English and Hebrew. At Schechter School, Shteyngart spent most of his time in isolation without any friends and was soon belittled and disparaged by his classmates who branded him a social misfit. However, this did not last long. Inspired by his love for writing, Shteyngart started working on his "first unpublished novel in English . . . *The Challenge*" (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 165) which featured a space fighter pilot named Flyboy as the hero. He fortunately was able to read his novel before his class in his English period and that allowed him to revamp his position with his classmates. Shteyngart writes, "Don't get me wrong. I'm still a hated freak. But here's what I am doing: I am redefining "the terms under which I am a hated freak." (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 170). His friends started taking interest in his work and were eager to know if he wrote anything new or "Will the Lopezians attack? What's Dr. Omar gonna do next?" (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 170). Soon, he 'ran out' of *The Challenge* and came back with *Invasion From Outer Space* which brought with it a torrent of veneration from his classmates. "It was here at Solomon Schechter that Shteyngart discovers for the first-time writing's transformative power" (Furman, 2015, p. 118).

One of the striking features of Shteyngart as a translingual writer is his marvellous command over the English language. "It is through writing fiction in English that English became his primary

tongue, rather than the other way around" (Wanner, 2015, p. 144). This has contributed to the mastery over his adopted language. For the most part, he conforms to the English language just like a native American born speaker of the language would, barring a few inside jokes from Russian, only accessible to the bilingual speaker. However, writing provides Shteyngart more than just safe harbour, "as a Russian immigrant in America, writing is also a way to find his place in a new world and the space in which to negotiate his hybrid identity" (Furman, 2015, p. 118). As he struggled to make the English language his own, writing proved to be a fruitful task – as the more he wrote, the more at home he felt with the language. Shteyngart believed that linguistic adaption was extremely crucial in ensuring a successful cultural adaption. But just like thousands of other immigrants, this adaption is never complete. He was constantly looking for what it truly means to be a Russian-American, as he says in his school reunion party, "We Soviet Jews are simply invited to the wrong party... we didn't know who we were" (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 229). All of Shteyngart's work are an attempt in discovering "who we were" and what it means to be a Russian-American hybrid.

Little Failure is undoubtedly a cross-cultural immigrant's tale – a story of growing up in an immigrant household and trying to fit in as a doubly hyphenated American. Although the book portrays the life of a Russian-Jewish immigrant family in the US, the portrayal itself is filled with multicultural tenets, not limited to the Russian-Jewish community in the US alone. Centrality is core to Shteyngart's book. As Geoff Hamilton comments in *Understanding Gary Shteyngart*, "identity-formation and belonging, and of tradition and the conditions of belief, common to globalized societies" (Hamilton, 2017, p. 2). Thus, in the process of narrating himself, Shteyngart highlights contemporary immigrant life in America vis-à-vis the global scenario where like him thousands are struggling against displacement, dislocation, and isolation in a foreign land, in an attempt to secure a sense of identity and belonging.

Apart from Shteyngart himself, the two other pivotal characters in *Little Failure* are those of his parents. Shteyngart, in conversation with Aleksandar Hemon at the Chicago Humanities Festival, admits that the book was "an unhappy love letter to my parents". After immigrating to the US, his parents had to build their lives from the scratch – his father was a mechanical engineer and mother a piano teacher – found the process of acculturation extremely taxing and it ultimately left a huge impact in their lives. Their move was further problematised by the ongoing Cold War tensions, where anyone from the Soviet Union – America's nemesis – were looked through the lens of doubt, and Shteyngart's origins contributed to the cause. The status of the Shteyngart family were ambivalent and wavering since the time they set foot in the US. For their Jewish friends in America, they were the embodiment of the penurious Europeans counterparts who require assistance and sustenance in the name of a common Jewish heritage; on the other hand, they were also scrutinised for being refugees from America's main political adversary. But Shteyngart soon realises that even though they were underprivileged, there were not at the bottom of the social ladder, thanks to the colour of their skin, "We are refugees and even Jews, ... but we are also something that we never really had the chance to appreciate back home. We are white" (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 123). This exposes the pitfalls of a multicultural America which provides preferential treatment to a few based-on their ethnicity and race.

Russian language and culture has remained central to Shteyngart's post immigration life. Since his childhood days he was made to believe that Russian language and culture was supreme,

"I was taught that Russian culture was the best culture in the world", yet he never openly displayed his nation allegiances – neither to Russian nor to America. However, he was extremely forthcoming in describing the unparalleled impact Russian literature had on him. Furthermore, Shteyngart's desire to get assimilated into the mainstream American milieu becomes a reality with the purchase of a television set "a twenty-seven inch salmon-coloured Sony Trinitron, with a sleek remote control" (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 212). The television was common to all American households, it was a sign of Americanness, and its presence in the Shteyngart household took them a step closer at realising their American-ness.

One of the major points of contestation in the book is the author's struggle between being a Russian Jew and being an American Jew. Most American Jews, even to this day, consider the Russian Jews to be untaught in the mannerism of the Jewish faith. Shteyngart, like thousands of other Russian Jews, eat pork which goes against the doctrine of Kashrut² and therefore are considered sinners by their American counterparts. For the American Jews, perhaps the most sacrilegious act done by their Russian brethren is not performing the circumcision ritual on young boys – and Shteyngart too was not circumcised when he moved to the United States. Circumcision is one of the most crucial commandments in the Jewish faith, and not following it displays a clear disassociation from the basic tenants of the religion. He was later officially made into a Jew in the US when he was circumcised, "... I get the present every boy wants. A circumcision" (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 132).

(III)

"Little Failure is a rich, nuanced memoir. It's an immigrant story, a coming-of-age story, a becoming-a-writer story, and a becoming-a-mensch story, and in all these ways it is, unambivalently, a success" (Wolitzer, 2013). *Little Failure* invites the readers to take a glimpse into the unfiltered life of a Soviet Jewish immigrant family's trials and tribulations in America. By doing so, it also highlights the greater concern and uncertainties of the immigrant life, not only in the US but worldwide, in this period of globalisation. It brings out both the snares and snags of American multiculturalism, and also its socio-cultural diversity which ultimately allowed Gary Shteyngart – a Jewish born in Soviet Russia living in New York City – to talk about his life and experiences without any inhibitions and reservation, and this is what Shteyngart celebrates in his memoir.

In his classic 1951 memoir, "Speak, Memory," Vladimir Nabokov confesses that "the nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood." Shteyngart's story couldn't be more different from Nabokov's, but he nimbly achieves the noble Nabokovian goal of letting sentiment in without ever becoming sentimental (Zeidner, 2014).

Little Failure pens down his ongoing search for his self, something which he briefly discovers through writing – the characters of his novels are manifestations of people and situation around him, and this ongoing search takes him from a never-hear-never-read writer to a celebrated author. Immigrants like him in America are constantly negotiating their past and their present;

2 It is a set of dietary laws dealing with the foods that Jews are permitted to eat and how those foods must be prepared according to Jewish law.

and this relentless perusal, this constant negotiation is what makes their life whole and meaningful in an otherwise foreign land.

References

1. Furman, Yelena. "TELLING THEIR HYBRID STORIES: THREE RECENT WORKS OF RUSSIAN-AMERICAN FICTION." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2015, pp. 116–124. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44739585. Accessed 1 Oct. 2020.
2. *HYBRID SELVES, HYBRID TEXTS: EMBRACING THE HYPHEN IN RUSSIAN-AMERICAN FICTION.* *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 55(1), 19-37. Retrieved February 1, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23347691>
3. Hamilton, Geoff. *Understanding Gary Shteyngart.* University of South Carolina Press, 2017.
4. "Little Failure: Gary Shteyngart in Conversation w/ Aleksandar Hemon". YouTube, uploaded by Chicago Humanities Festival, 27 January 2004. https://youtu.be/vnm4pvt7_Jg
5. Shteyngart, Gary. *Little Failure: A Memoir.* Random House, 2014.
6. Wanner, Adrian. "Writing the Translingual Life: Recent Memoirs and Auto-Fiction by Russian-American and Russian- German Novelists." *L2 Journal*, vol. 7, 2015, pp. 141–151., doi:10.5070/L27122756.
7. Wolitzer, Meg. "Gary Shteyngart's 'Little Failure' Is An Unambivalent Success." NPR, 27 Dec. 2013, www.npr.org/2013/12/27/257551858/gary-shteyngarts-little-failure-is-an-unambivalent-success. Accessed 8 Oct. 2020.
8. Zeidner, Lisa. "Book Review: 'Little Failure: A Memoir' by Gary Shteyngart". *The Washington Post*, 2 Jan. 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/book-review-little-failure-a-memoir-by-gary-shteyngart/2014/01/02/b3a7b3d4-636f-11e3-a373-0f9f2d1c2b61_story.html. Accessed 3 Oct. 2020.

Культурная гибридность и русско-американский контекст: Книга *Little Failure* Гэри Штейнгарта

Аннотация: С 1970-х до конца XX века Америка стала свидетелем масштабной иммиграции российских граждан на свои земли, особенно людей, исповедующих иудейскую веру. Из-за жесткой антисемитской политики тогдашнего коммунистического режима Советской России многие российские евреи иммигрировали в различные страны, в такие как – Израиль, Германия, США и некоторые европейские страны. Подавляющее большинство мигрантов все же предпочли Америку как основное место для переселения.

Гэри Штейнгарт принадлежит к одной из таких иммигрантских семей. Как представитель молодого поколения русско-американских романистов, Штейнгарт, так и его предшественник Иосиф Бродский, эмигрант третьей волны, начинает ориентировать издание своих публикаций на английском языке.

Его произведения, преимущественно художественные, описывают опыт проживания еврейских иммигрантов в Соединенных Штатах, являющиеся одним из основных центров переселения советских евреев. Настоящая статья направлена на исследование широкого круга проблем культурной гибридности, идентичности и препятствий на пути к ассимиляции, о которых говорится в мемуарах Штейнгарта *Little Failure* (Маленькая неудача, 2014). В статье основное внимание уделяется темам, связанным с проблемами родного языка и иностранного, а также трудности, вызванные миграцией, проблемы ассимиляции и адаптации в чужой стране, вопросы идентичности и др.

Штейнгарт успешно сочетает в своих произведениях гибридность элементов культуры, как русской, так и американской, тем самым создавая новый стиль литературного пейзажа, изобилующий русскими словами и фразами, однако уже сам по себе не являющимся ни русским, ни американцем, но приобретающий новую идентичность как – русский американец.

Ключевые слова: гибридность, иммиграция, евреи, идентичность, ностальгия