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Assimilation and its Effects in Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*

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## Introduction

The novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* talks about the character David and his struggle from rags to riches in America, from an impoverished, Jewish immigrant, to a successful business magnate in the clothing industry, worth millions. Reading this, one might think it is nothing but a “rags to riches” story, a story of a self-made man. Though that theme is evident in the novel, it is so much more than that. Cahan, an immigrant himself, coming to America in 1882, from Vilnius due to the Russian pogroms masterfully encapsulates the immigrant experience, the hardships and troubles one undergoes when they arrive in that society, and the struggle to fit in. This struggle to fit in is one of the major topics in the novel, which I will discuss in this paper. It is a process of a double-edged sword which can be rewarding, but equally harmful as well, harm which can be detrimental to the person of an individual, ultimately result in the loss of self. In other words, the novel can also be read as a warning for those who try too hard to assimilate and end up losing themselves in the process. Assimilation is a key component in finding one’s place into a given society, but it can be more harmful than beneficial. By using a psychological approach, I will try to analyse what sort of effect this assimilation has had on the novel’s title character David.

## Process of Assimilation

At this point I believe it is worthy to talk about the process of assimilation, and what it entails. Broadly defined assimilation is the process of integrating oneself in the host society where one has decided to immigrate to. It is certainly not an easy process, but a long, hard and arduous one. Sociologist Milton Gordon divides the process into seven parts, all following the previous one, though at times not in order. Acculturation is the first step towards assimilation. It entails the adoption of the values and the change of cultural patterns to those of the “host society” (71). That means that one starts to behave like the people around them do and begins to share in what is valued within the society. It is not easy to do so, especially if one would immigrate from a place so astronomically different, like David coming from Eastern Europe, Russia more specifically, to America. The values and behaviours these two societies hold are so opposed that it would take a huge amount of effort to adapt. The struggle is greater for David because he does not simply come from Russia, but from a closed and conservative Jewish community. With their strict ways of life, following the observations of Torah, or the Jewish holy rules, which prohibit one of mingling with Gentiles, and keeps them away from the society outside, it is a stark contrast to America’s more liberal society where such ways are hard to find their place in, let alone keep on existing. David begins his process of acculturation by wanting to become more “American.” In order to achieve this, he starts to adopt America’s greatest value, which is spending, in other words capitalism. Even in the 1880’s American society was highly capitalistic, valuing over all money and their liberty to spend them on costly items. The people wanted to spoil themselves rotten by indulging in the buying of materialistic goods such as clothes, watches, expensive cars and trips abroad, in other words it was, as it still is a society mostly running on cash, and earthly values. David does not remain immune to the allure of these new opportunities and Reb Steiner’s words to David that “one becomes a Gentile there” (Cahan38) by the end of the novel become a self-fulfilling prophecy, with David having become a capitalist, Gentile.

That second part is part of the second step toward assimilation which is the ‘structural assimilation’ where one enters in the political, economic and social institutions of the ‘host society’ by starting to work there for example or opening their own business and so forth. David does this by starting his own cloak company, becoming one of the top three manufacturers within the country thus fulfilling the cycle. But there is much more to this than the adoption of values and integrating within the business sphere. Despite achieving what he set out to do, David feels the sense of loss and unhappiness at every success and at the end of the novel he himself gives the answer to his own question, “[a]m I happy?”, “[n]o, I am not happy” (283/4). What is wrong here? What could be better than achieving enormous financial success and being able to afford anything your heart desires? The wrong is the loss of self, which David encounters, because he did not really want to become a millionaire, he had wanted to become a scholar, a man of great learning, to be counted among the top intellectual strata, but he only managed to become miserable and someone who desperately wants to mingle with those people like whom he wanted to be, thus falling out of place. On the road to his assimilation, to his “Americanisation” David has lost sight of who he was before coming to America, for as he says “David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well−known cloak−manufacturer” (287). In the first step of acculturation and adopting the American societal values he had grown to despise those values which were nurtured in his own shtetl, because to him they seemed as something insignificant and unimportant as opposed to the developed and busy society of America, with its extravagant lifestyle, focus on business and money making, electric lamps etc. The opportunities have blinded and dazzled him, addling his sense of home. One of the values being lost and scorned is religion. In a society where having more money is more important than faith, religion has hardly any place. People observe but do not really believe. When David first has a taste of having enough money, to buy oneself more food and cloth, as supposed to how he has lived before, in poverty and squalor, it deteriorates his faith and shakes it to the core. Now that he has tasted the sweet taste of the dollar, he becomes less interested in the spiritual and effectively subscribes to the religion of the dollar, David himself claiming that businessmen have no religion, except apparently the one unofficial of the dollar.

## Main Part

## Degradation of the Self

Jewish writers who had immigrated to America criticize the society’s love for money, by writing satirical verses in the style of the Talmud. They write that America is the land of the godless, a *treyfene medine,* an unkosher country, ofthose who operate big wheels whom they call *ama reka,* hollow people, all they care about is “money, money, money” (Howe 75). The dollar has become the new golden calf, and everyone follow its cult, even those that were supposed to be Good Jews. Another writer says that in America “money answereth all things, but the poor man’s wisdom is despised” (qtd in Howe 75). What this tells us is that no one bothers to really lend an ear to the experiences of the ones who had suffered, and those who preach religion. Another Hebraist laments the state of his fellow countrymen, writing “[c]ut suddenly adrift from their ancient moorings they were floundering in a moral void, good conduct, reverence and religion, had all gone by the board . . .”(75) as with Levinsky who had severed his ties to his roots, forgoes his religious views and values.

On the other hand, as much as the new society surrounding the individual is to blame for the forgoing of one’s ideals, the old one must not be exempt of blame either. While living in a shtetl may have instilled in David some good, traditional beliefs it has also stifled his ability to personal liberty, which he attains in America. One way that this is done is by prohibiting the scholars of the Talmud to have relationships, or any sort of acts of endearment with women. By not being able to experience such trials in his adolescence, David jumps at the opportunity when he comes to America, he is free to fall in love. However, even this is wrought with distaste. His new American persona, David the businessman has seeped into even his way of how he feels about love. Most of the “relationships” can be seen as nothing but business transactions and within which David shows his amorality and lack of proper, social decorum. He tries to get Gitty to marry him so that he has enough money to pay his college tuition, so when he professes that he genuinely loves her it is nothing more than a lie, one could even say a business scheme. Even his self-professed love towards Dora in whose house he is a boarder is devoid of any sense towards community. He seduces her and makes her fall in love with him by using his command of English to impress her, knowingly exploiting the fact that she has not been married to Max out of love. This whole ordeal is an ideal example of how his good conduct and reverence had gone over the board. He knowingly pursues Dora, a married woman, and older than him, and before that he even tries to seduce his landlady who is also much older than him and practically could be his mother. Nothing of the respect for your elders, that traditional old-world value had remained, David had become a self-serving, irredeemable capitalist who has no moral or emotional values but his business sense. He even uses business slang to refer to a girl he was arranged to meet with the prospect of marriage, saying to Nodelman, ‘the wares are too heavy, I need a lighter stock’ which clearly shows his lack of respect towards a fellow human being.

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## Causes for, and Effects of Americanisation

David’s deepest loyalty is that to America and he has to Americanise no matter what. Other, fully integrated Jews feel the same way and they prefer their “Americanness” to their Jewishness. They revere and sing the American anthem as if they were chanting a song dedicated to God, going wild at it, while they grow bored on a Yiddish performance. They have forsaken their old traditions and values to the preference of something more modern and better. It can be said that the external stimuli of American “greatness” impacts the way we feel about our past, by adopting more and more American values and *modus vivendi* results in a depreciating way of thinking about one’s origin, and that is strong within David. In light to this Green suggests that “. . . during the process of absorbing the values of the new environment, the Jew may lose the beneficial values of his or her heritage” (19). The love of the material and self-gratification replace the love of the spiritual and traditional. But there is yet another reason why the people wanted to be more American than to be what they used to, before arriving on America’s shores. The poor living conditions and struggling for livelihood also contributes to the sense of resentment to one’s own origins. Seeing the new world and the options it offers, the option for freedom and material liberty creates a natural aversion to what one used to be so people seldom want to recollect their past with pride and honour, and that is certainly the case with David. The opportunities for material success that come with assimilation override any sense of attachment he may have felt to his old life, he now undergoes a new transformation, he is becoming a new man, he is, in his own words a “new-born babe”(45). However, the feeling of being disgusted by living as a pauper almost, should not be a reason for a collective hate towards one’s own background, but David’s repulsion towards it, coupled with the misfortune he had to suffer of losing his mother cause him to start despising even those good things he had obtained by living in Russia, the traditional values of religion, family and community. So, he hurries on to become “American” because apparently everything about being an American is so much better than what he used to be. David even felt physically disgusted by the fact that he was not born an American, his Jewishness was like a disease that no doctor could remove, an obstacle, an unwanted nuisance on his way to become fully “American.” He plunges into the process without giving it a thought as to what that process would cost him.

Integral to this process is learning the language: English. Undergoing that process makes him hate the way he pronounces certain English words, envying the Americans for their inborn ability to speak the language. He is so fascinated by it that he even marvels a butcher for his way of speaking, so much he is infatuated by the new culture that the simplest thing seems to him as something ground-breaking. By learning English, Yiddish falls out of favour with him, and he completely abandons using the language. He begins picking up Americanisms, and once he becomes a “greenhorn” businessman he starts absorbing any type of business slang he can find in newspapers. After sufficiently learning English another thing he does is absorb the habits of businessmen he hangs around with and emulate their ways. Howe concludes that the English language and American customs conclude a clean and ruthless sweep of everything Jewish, disturbing the equality between past and present (267), and that is a perfect summation of what it did to David, his Jewishness was swept aside and replaced with his new “American” self.

Another element in becoming more American, was the appearance, it is the first thing David transforms about himself after his arrival. Barbara Schreier tells us, “[t]o newly arrived immigrants a change of clothes was the only way they could identify themselves as American Jews” (27), therefore clothing was important in washing away one’s “greenhornness”. Children of Jews who had immigrated to America found it unacceptable to have their mothers wear their old, traditional clothes, and even felt ashamed if they would not change their ways (31). Some even told their parents prior departure to leave their old clothes behind, because such clothing had no place in the modern American society. From this follows that the clothing you wore was a very potent sign of being American. That is why upon clothing himself, his sponsor who had obtained the clothes for him proclaims that David is finally starting to become more American. Next in line are the dreadlocks which David has cut off, but the dreadlocks are not a fashion statement, a style of hair, it is a symbol of the Orthodox Jewish religion, it is a symbol of one’s own faith, and the act of them being cut off has a symbolic meaning. By cutting his dreadlocks, David also cuts his ties with his Orthodoxy, ties which were already loose enough prior his coming to America.

While he was living in Russia his faith had already started to deteriorate after the death of his mother. He tells us that he has lost that link with God which he so closely felt before. From always feeling His presence around him the connection to his Lord grows cold later on and he cannot feel His presence as devotedly as he has before, it is as if God had left his side. Another incident before the passing of his mother had also served to shake his faith and shows the weakness of the Jewish faith. His friend Naphtali proclaims that there is no God, that it is all hogwash, and instead focusing on his Talmud studies he becomes more interested in Russian novelists. David felt angry but he could not rebuke his friend because he lacked the sufficient knowledge of how to do it, he considered himself pious but did not know what arguments to present to defend himself. This shallow belief is one of the factors that contributes to him discarding his faith. The weak position in which David finds himself with regards to his faith. can be ascribed to some inherent faults within Judaism. According to the professor of American Studies, Allen Guttman, Judaism unlike Christianity for instance, has been concerned with ritualised behaviour rather than creeds, orthopraxis and not orthodoxy (10). “Despite its name, Orthodox Judaism is a way of life rather than a series of definitions and beliefs” (ibid). From this it could be argued that unlike the Christians, the Jews had no real substance to cling onto, therefore upon their meeting with North America their faith was easily shaken and ultimately, foregone. The intensity and the hurried way of life in America shatter their traditional Jewish decorum, and the immigrants who remined Orthodox had their expectations of status collapse and sense of self shattered into shame.

## Forsaking of the Self

David felt shame because of his gesticulations while he talked, which were a part of him due to his Talmudic scholarship, and which were ridiculed by Loeb, a fellow Jew though of American birth and German descent. The reason why Loeb ridicules him because of his gesticulations has to do with his background. Being of American birth, a second, possibly third generation of a German Jew, to Loeb all that the things that may have mattered to his ancestors are lost on him, he is a full-blooded American, and as such everything that is Jewish, in this case David’s way of talking with his gesticulations is a subject of ridicule, because it is a sign of being different. Looking at the actual history we learn that the German Jews, who had started to arrive in America much earlier than their Eastern European counterparts had, by the time of the events in the novel, been thoroughly Americanised which resulted in looking down on the latter. This is the reason why rivalries between them sprouted, as embodied by Levinsky’s relationship to Loeb, however that is of no consequence for this paper. What matters is that they wished for a rapid Americanisation of the Eastern Jews because they often felt ashamed by the way they handled themselves in the new society, with their outdated and foreign customs, seeing them as slovenly and uncouth.

Thus, the traditional appearance of the Eastern European Jew, the women wearing scarfs or wigs to cover their heads, and the men having dreadlocks becomes a source of shame for those Americanised Jews because the American society at the time was hard to accept an individual that looked unamerican. People that looked different were looked upon differently as evident with the grimace of the policeman in New York when David tries to communicate with him. The ‘other’ created a sense of aversion within those of Anglo-Saxon descent therefore if one would want to be accepted, they had no choice but to assimilate.

Therefore, it could be said that new immigrants were in a way pressured into adopting the values of the new society by their peers and that often resulted in traumatic and unpleasant experiences. Some found themselves unable to fit in at all, being left to live on the margins of society. For some it meant a substantial fall from grace, which Cahan embodies in the character of Tevkin. Once a prominent Hebrew writer in Russia, well read and respected now, a petty real estate agent in America, struggling to survive. Poetry does not earn your bread, he tells David in other words when the latter meets him at an East Side Café where all sorts of marginalised intellectuals meet up. That was the sad reality of the New World, a society that values lively entertainment like modern theatre has no love for old poetics. “The devil with poetry! . . . Be . . . anything but a Hebrew Poet in America”(qtd in Howe 75) , comments Menakim Dolitsky, a Hebraist, in a passionate a la Tevkin speech to another Hebraist, adding that Hebrew poets have been degraded to writing bad novels for maids. One can only imagine the blow and the impact this would have on the self-esteem and self-respect of these prestigious individuals.

## Unmaking of the Self

This is the problem of the American melting pot. Instead of accepting people on the principle of individualism, with respect towards one’s specific culture and origins, it sought to absorb the individual into the fabric of society and make an American out of them. When you come into a society like that, it is hardly possible to retain one’s sense of self. That, coupled with the harsh history of the immigrants, a past not so worthy of remembrance, results in the Americanised version of the person, devoid of all previous sentiment to his true origins and old values. American society through its external stimulus teaches the immigrants that such values have no place in the new world, it does not favour them, it does not want them, and does not want to conform to those who want to retain them; again, there is not a real choice but to Americanise. Some immigrants have refused to do so, and as a result found it hard to survive in their environment remaining mostly poor and living on the dregs of the society. Some Jews have tried to find some middle-ground between their old Jewishness and new American life, which resulted in faiths like Reform Judaism and so forth. David tried to do neither, nor retain his old-self, nor trying to find a middle-ground, he decided to completely get rid of his past and become fully American, and that is his downfall.

Thus he has betrayed the past or has failed to bring it forward to the present. That

ability to offset the past, which enabled him to become the business success he was,

is an advantage that eventually turns against him. This is his tragedy. (Fein 5)

But one cannot run from the past, no matter how hard they would try. Instead of wanting to come to terms with it, and with what he used to be he tried to suppress it, destroy it even, but it only resulted in it seeping through inside his thoughts as he grows older, it begins to haunt him. Isaac Rosenfeld, an American Jewish author sees this as a sign of David’s inner Jewishness. Writing about this he says, “[n]othing in a man’s life could be more purely Jewish, and his constant longing, through all his later years for the conditions of his past confirms in him an unchanging spirit” (274). This means that deep inside David was in fact, still Jewish. Furthermore, being among people like Nodelman and Tevkin, he comes to realise the true value of having a family, of having someone to fight for. He comes to the realisation that he has become successful without knowing who he has worked for. He had thought that he was doing it for himself but clearly it is not the case because he gets no satisfaction out of it, “he also feels that in that shift to the successful New World self (during which he never marries and has children), he has failed to bring together his life” (Fein 5).

Rosenfeld posits that the poverty, squalor and the death of his mother are at the core of his permanent dissatisfaction, and it is expressed in two ways (276). One is the yearning for fulfilment to get everything that he could not previously which is wealth, dignity including liberty, all which he deems as positive American values. The second way is organic habit, the events in his life are so predetermined by what he has become, thus dissatisfaction “. . . returns every fulfilment, by a way not matter how roundabout, to the original tension . . .” (276), rendering satisfaction impossible. In other words, Rosenfeld is trying to say that David’s previous life in Antomir had had such an impact on him, such an emotional imprint that he Is unable to enjoy anything that he achieves for himself, he is used to such squalor that he does not know how to properly enjoy all the things he achieves. It is no wonder that Antomir seems more alluring to him than the hustle and bustle of New York, that the candles of his mother’s seemed to light with a new reverence, because that is who he truly is, David of Antomir, the boy who swayed over the Talmud, not David of America, the cloak manufacturer. He was bred, born and raised in Antomir, and no matter how poor and wretched that place may be, it is his true home, not the rich, capitalist society in New York. He does not belong in that world, not really, that is why he does not feel at home. He comes to realise that “. . . his future [is] determined not only by the past, but by his vehement denial of it” (Engel 43). Unfortunately, the impact of the new world has made him forget himself, who he is, where he comes from, and what are his heart’s true desires, he was shaped by the decadent society of America and he had let that happen, being emotionally swept by the current of circumstances surrounding him instead of holding his ground and staying true to himself. “Levinsky’s denial of his past, his Jewish identity, and his European experience, amounts finally to a disabling self betrayal, an unmaking of the self ”(Engel 43).

Even his engagement to Fanny is a sham, even he himself professes to the reader that he does not love her, that there are no real feelings in him towards her. He is with her because he is searching for some sense of fulfilment without knowing himself first. Which is why it is easily for him to fall in love with Anna Tevkin, the socialist daughter of the Hebraist Tevkin, whom he courts in order to get to her. In his pursuit of Anna, he fails to try and understand her, blindly trying to court her without reading the signs that she is not into him, or blatantly ignoring them, and as a result he is utterly shocked and devasted when she rejects him. Instead of re-examining himself and his actions, he finds fault in others and the circumstances that led to his misfortunes. He criticises the people for going to the Jewish resort where he had met her, saying that they are decadent, shallow, and base, when he himself is no better than the same people he criticises. He has become a hypocrite, much like the society he idealises. US society professes democracy, but corrupt politicians are considered great men, it promotes free elections but indulges in voter buying. David is the same, he has become an atheist, alienated from his own faith, he preserves a shallow piety by contributing donations to the synagogue he used to frequent upon his arrival, ‘the sons of Antomir.’ He contributes to it, yet he exploits the elderly workers from Antomir in his shop, working them twice as much for less pay, even on Shabbat.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, what could be said about David is that he has become self-centred, egoistic, greedy and morally bankrupt, a product of an equally as such society. The values of caring about own’s community and respecting the feelings and wishes of others are no longer present, the religion which values religious observance and a strict and pious life devoted to God is gone, being replaced for the want of material good, without any real sense of wanting to possess it. He has ignored his innermost desire of becoming a learned man with his pursuit of greatness filled with emptiness, a man so filled with worldly goods but devoid of any soul. His blind pursuit of American ‘greatness’ of becoming ‘American’ has left him estranged from his true self, and thus a hapless, unfulfilled wreck. Mr. Even, the man who had given him his first money in the synagogue, is repulsed by him on their second meeting. He does not show it, but it is clear to David that the feeling of compassion he had for David the greenhorn was now gone. “What Mr. Even realizes is that America has transformed David Levinsky. New York is both the place of Levinsky’s liberation of an asphyxiating childhood and the source of his adult corruption” (Green 20).

But not only of him, America had made soulless, money driven ingrates of others as well like Mannheimer, the German Jew who berates David and humiliates him in front of all the other workers when by accident he spills some milk over the silks, in the factory where he works. This incident serves as a driving force to propel David into the world of business and the cloak manufacturing. Had Manheimer acted differently, showed some understanding and compassion towards David, he would not have set out on that road, he would have finished his college education and achieved his goal of becoming a scholar. But the fault is as much as David’s as it is Manheimer’s. He allowed himself to be emotionally swept by the incident, and instead of dealing with it he sets on his path out of revenge. As much as the new, modern American society has to do with David has become, so does the old one from his past. The poor living conditions, the constant discrimination of the Jews by their Russian homeland added to the dissatisfaction and the drive and will to Americanise, leaving it all behind. The misery made it hard to see whatever good, intrinsic values it had beneath that wretchedness, so they were pushed aside and abandoned. So, it could be said that he is a victim of circumstances as much as it is his own fault for the position he is in now: an unhappy man, alienated from his true self. In the end I would finish up with the words of Professor Green who says that “. . . in this way, the novel serves as a warning to Jews [and any other I would say] not only against total cultural assimilation, but also ethical deterioration” (20).

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