

Jewish versus Goyish: A Bakhtinian Dialogic Exploration into Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*

Greeshma Peethambaran

Abstract—Pegged on the concept of “otherness”, Bakhtin’s principle of dialogue highlights the differential relation between a centre and all that is not the centre. Bakhtinian thought centers on the dialogue between the “self” and the “other”. Bakhtin argues that any notion acquires meaning only in dialogue with another notion. However, the “self” in Bakhtin is not a self-sufficient construct by itself. The “self” gains meaning/existence only in its relation with the “other”. The present paper attempts to probe Zadie Smith’s *The Autograph Man* as a dialogic narrative viewing it as a dialogue between the “self” and the “other”, which constitutes the Jewish and the Goyish voices in the novel.

Index Terms—Dialogic, self, other, centre, non-centre, Goyish.

I. INTRODUCTION

A novel is a “diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” [1].

Bakhtinian writings are animated and controlled by the principle of dialogue, which centers on the concept of “otherness”. By “otherness” is meant the differential relation between a centre and all that is not the centre. The “...center in Bakhtin’s thought [...] is a *relative* rather than an absolute term, and, as such, one with no claim to absolute privilege, lest of all one with transcendent ambitions” [2]. The last point here is principally significant for certain terms like the “self” and the “other” is crucial to Bakhtin’s thought.

Bakhtinian thought centers on the dialogue between the “self” and the “other”. In fact, dialogism argues that meaning is relative, in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies. In other words, any notion acquires meaning only in dialogue with another notion.

The “self” is not a self-sufficient construct by itself. The “self” gains meaning/existence only in its relation with the “other”. In other words, “the self/other is a relation of simultaneity” [2]. The present paper explicates *The Autograph Man* as a dialogic narrative. The novel is viewed as a dialogue between the “self” and the “other”, which constitutes the Jewish and the Goyish voices in the novel. However, both the voices become the “self” in different situations. Thus, when one becomes the “self” the other becomes the “other”.

II. THE JEWISH AND THE GOYISH VOICES

The relation between the “self” and the “other” in the novel is not easy to discern and dissect. Alex-Li is in constant search to find meaning to his life. His life seems to be oscillating between faith and fame. The religious half of Alex-Li is in conflict with his materialistic half. In this light the materialistic half of Alex-Li can be considered the “self”, which forms the centre, and the religious half as the “other”. This is what constitutes the intersecting Goyish and Jewish voices in the novel. ‘Goy’ is the Jewish name for a non-Jew; in other words, it refers to a person who is not a Jew. In the novel Zadie Smith uses the term “Goyish” to refer to the selfish and materialistic side in Alex-Li’s life because; goyishness, in all its forms, had become Alex-Li’s obsession.

However, the point to be noted here is that, when the materialistic/goyish half of Alex-Li becomes the “self”, all the other voices relating to him – Esther’s voice, Adam’s voice, his father’s voice which stands for the past, the voice of the rabbis etc – become the “other”, since these voices represent the religious/ Jewish part. But “self” is not a concrete phenomenon. It keeps shifting according to the changes that happen to the character concerned. So, the goyish half of Alex-Li does not always remain the “self”. With the realization of the truth about Kitty, a thorough change happens to Alex-Li’s life. At this point, the Jewish side in him gains significance which then becomes the “self”; whereby all goyish voices like the voice of the celebrities, especially that of Kitty Alexander, whom Alex-Li idol-worships, and the voices from the world of autograph collection becomes the “other”. This makes possible a dialogue between the “self” and the “other” in each situation. Such a state arises because “the simultaneous presence of these two possibilities (the self and the other) is indispensable for any act of comprehension” [2]. Further, each differentiates the other whereby meaning is created.

“To Bakhtin a literary work is [...] a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse” [3]. The novel *The Autograph Man* is set in the fictional suburb of Mountjoy, in north London. “*The Autograph Man*, Smith’s second novel, is about Jewish cabbalism and is ‘much funnier’ than her debut novel *White Teeth*” [4]. The half Chinese, half Jewish Alex-Li Tandem is the autograph man in the novel. He is the son of Li-Jin and Sarah. Alex-Li was a twelve year boy when he is introduced to the readers in the prologue. The prologue seems to be the most powerful part in the entire novel since it is the prologue that plots the trajectory of Alex-Li’s life with his attempt to procure the first autograph.

Li-Jin Tandem takes his son to a wrestling match along

with Alex-Li's friends, the "suburban tyrant" Mark Rubinfine and a black Jewish kid named Adam Jacobs. The match was between Giant Haystack and Big Daddy, "...one huge man from TV. His name is Big Daddy and right now he is the most famous wrestler in Britain. He is like god [...] Everybody likes him..." [5]. It is at this match Alex-Li meets Joseph Klein who has an obsession for collecting autographs, "I collect things," says Joseph Klein [...] "Things, stuff, autographs sometimes [...] I keep them. In albums, I file them. I find it extremely worthwhile" [5]. Joseph gains others' respect when he tells them about the Albert Einstein autograph in his "Judaica" that is worth three thousand pounds.

Alex-Li seems to be smitten by Joseph's obsession. When Big Daddy the favorite wins, Alex-Li makes his way up to the ring to ask for his first autograph:

Alex whips round, delighted, and jumps up looking for Li-Jin so he can show it to him, and Li-Jin jumps up too and tries to wave, but he is too small to get above a crowd like this and a glimpse of Alex's creased forehead is the last thing Li-Jin sees before his knees crumple beneath him and his head hits the floor [5].

In the meantime Li-Jin is killed by the brain tumor which he had been concealing from his family.

Li-Jin's life ends as Alex-Li's begins. With the death of his father, Alex-Li's faith in religion (Judaism) diminishes to be replaced by the phony world of fame and celebrity. A decade later, as the novel proper initiates, it is Alex-Li who has become a dealer in celebrity autographs. Big Daddy's casual scrawl triggered off a lifelong passion; Alex-Li is now a professional autograph dealer transforming little slips of paper into relics of celebrity, "I am an Autograph Man [...]. This is a simpler game than chess. Simpler even than snakes and ladders. This is a slow, malicious game [...] of ticktacktoe" [5]. He blindly believes that "the collector is the savior of objects that might otherwise be lost" [5].

However, all is not well in Alex-Li's world. He seems to have an irrepressible fixation for drugs and alcohol. He wakes-up from a three-day drug hangover only to find himself shattered, his car smashed and his girlfriend Esther determined never to talk to him again.

Opening the door of his living room, he now remembered quite clearly that under the prolonged influence of a hallucinogen he had swerved his car into a bus-stop while his girlfriend Esther sat in the passenger seat [5].

Alex-Li's friends Adam, who runs a video shop by now and who seeks enlightenment through drug-fueled contemplation about Jewish mysticism; Rubinfine, the formerly bully turned rabbi and Joseph, the former autograph man turned insurance salesman who has given his life to misery, are all trying to persuade him to say Kaddish (Jewish mourner's prayer) for his father's death anniversary.

To complicate things furthermore, an autograph of Kitty Alexander, the celebrated 1940s Hollywood actress whom Alex-Li blindly idolizes, turns pinned up on his front door. Infact, everyone thinks that Alex-Li forged Kitty's autograph while he was in his high mood:

Alex,' says Joseph in his quiet way, 'listen to me one

more time. You did not receive it from God. Nor did you receive it in the post. You forged it [...] It isn't real, it never will be real and things do not become real simply because we want them to be so [5].

However, the Jewish and the Goyish nature in Alex-Li is not completely lost. One can see both the Goyish and the Jewish aspect mingled in him. Infact, his name Alex-Li Tandem itself suggests this duality, for the word 'tandem', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means "one behind another/alongside each other, together".

The "self" and the "other" are always in communion with each other – a constant exchange of dialogues. It is from this dialogic exchange that the novel gains its meaning. In the case of Alex-Li there is a regular and incessant communication between his "self" and the "other". When Alex-Li is caught up in the world of autographs it is his materialistic side that gains importance in his life. Thus, the materialistic side forms the centre of his existence, that is, his "self", the religious part becoming the "other":

The Journey to God. It is very long. It is quite dull [...] But for Alex there was no merging, no loss of self. He didn't understand this idea of unity in nothingness. That sort of thing was beyond him. He felt no magic [5].

On seeing the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet painted on the wall of Adam's flat Alex-Li felt nothing mystical, instead it seemed to him "like a man waving his fist? A crown? Half a menorah? A table? A sleeping foetus? A long-haired sprite?" [5]. Thus, Alex-Li's existence can be viewed as an utterance – an utterance between his "self" and the "other". The event of existence has the nature of dialogue in this sense; there is no word directed to no one.

However, in the beginning of the novel we also find that Alex-Li is not completely away from his Jewish faith. He believes in God and he wouldn't even mind becoming a "rabbi" (a Jewish religious leader) but he cannot. It is his profession, which he calls as a "malicious game of ticktacktoe", that prevents him from becoming one. Thus, one can well say that it is the conflict in Alex-Li life that brings about meaning to the novel. It is to this conflict that Zadie Smith points at in the Epigraph given at the very beginning of the novel where she quotes Franz Kafka and Marilyn Monroe:

Naturally things cannot in reality fit together the way the evidence does in my letter; life is more than a Chinese puzzle.

— Franz Kafka, *Letter to His Fther*

I would always make believe that Clark Gable was my father.

— Marilyn Monroe

The latter is very much true of Alex-Li, for he always lives in a make-believe world of movies. He sees life as having a dream-like quality with a happy ending always, just as the happy ending of a cinema: "the miracle of cinema is how rarely the conviction of the happy ending is broken. The bigger miracle is that the convention of ending is never broken at all" [5]. However, the quote proves false towards the end of the novel, when Alex-Li realizes that life

is not what is seen in cinemas; reality lies outside the TV screen and the small bits of relics. Thus, one finds that Alex-Li's spiritual side gaining importance, which, now, becomes his "self"; and the materialistic part becomes the "other".

Further, there is also another way of seeing the relation between the 'self' and the 'other' – Alex-Li representing the 'self' and Adam representing the 'other', since Adam stands for the Jewish faith in the novel. Thus, the novel can be seen as a dialogue between Alex-Li Tandem and Adam Jacobs. The literal communication that takes place between Alex-Li and Adam show the former one's inability to believe in saying the Kaddish for his dead father.

Alex-Li's inability to come back to religion is the cause of his failure in life. But once he realizes the illusion behind fame, he starts experiencing "a new type of loneliness":

Feeling the suggestion of a new type of loneliness, one harder to shake than its predecessor, Alex made his way to the bar. [...] they're just valedictions, thought Alex with horror. Valedictions wearing a different garment! These people are saying goodbye to me. I am no longer of them. I am dead to them. I have passed on [5].

The above passage can be seen as a dialogue between Alex-Li's "self" – the religious voice – and the "other" – the materialistic voice. The Kaddish that Alex-Li says, which forms the "Epilogue" of the novel, becomes a symbolic gesture of his return to religion with an understanding of the "other". Here, Alex-Li comes to understand his true self through an understanding of his other half.

III. ALEX-LI: A TRUE JEW

"Zadie Smith seemed to omit no incident, no character, no metaphor, no joke that struck her fancy that [...] seemed right not just for this novel but for the world" [6]. Smith's *The Autograph Man* communicates the present generation's mad pursuit for fame and the futility such pursuits ultimately end in. The novel deals:

with the existential angst and the professional qualms of a few spiritually exhausted young London Jews, with a mixed background. This time the setting is polycentric, since the story takes place in London again and also in New York, both cities being hubs of fragmented world. Resorting to "a pastiche of forms and philosophies" and to a New Age ambience playing with a diffusive and unfocused spiritual search for authenticity, the novel quotes unconvincing bits borrowed from several cultural codes, especially from Judaism, introduced into the text in an intellectually minimal version[7].

However, Alex-Li's pursuit behind the fleeting pleasures of life can be justified when the reader comes to understand how Judaism teaches the Jews to respond to the momentary passions in life without being dominated by these passions. Borowitz in his book *Understanding Judaism* puts forth that Jews believe that it is inhuman to deny yourself the pleasures of life like money, sex and drinking just because they can easily get out of hand. This is because Judaism has a special way of dealing with the temptations in our lives. Judaism does not make temptations go away or be easy to

overcome because the evil urge that is found in every human being is too devious for that. Temptations always surround one in life. How a person respond to them shows what sort of person s/he is. Judaism helps one to understand what is happening in one's life and strengthens the effort to do the good. Thus, one can see duality even in the Jewish religion – having temptations in lives and the power to control them without being controlled by them.

So, in the case of Alex-Li, one sees the transitory pleasures involved very much in his life. His desire for money and fame is clearly seen in the selection of his profession, which, in turn, can be traced back to Jewish belief that:

it was better to have money than to be poor. That seems a natural choice. When you are able to buy nice clothes, have a fancy hi-fi set or movie camera, give lovely parties, and go to all sorts of interesting places, people think you are special. A Yiddish proverb says: When you've got money to spend, everyone thinks you're smart, good looking, and you even sing nicely". Maybe Jews have thought being poor was so undesirable because they've been poor so often in their history [8].

So, like any Jew Alex-Li too wants money for a happy and comfortable life. Drinking and sex, like money, are also his obsession. The beginning of Chapter One states how he wakes up after a sleep of "seventy-two hours". For three days Alex-Li was under the spell of drinks and drugs. Women are his next weakness. Alex-Li is of opinion that "beauty in women is the realization of the divine in human life" [5]. However, as the novel proceeds we find Alex-Li slowly realizing the faults in his life and starts correcting them. All the temptations in Alex-Li's life which "for a time had made itself famous all through his body [...] was over" [5]. Alex-Li begins a new life with the realization of evil effect of the temptations in his life. Like a true Jew he recognizes:

"Money, sex, liquor shouldn't be ignored, but neither should they be worshipped. They and all other things that tempt us have a place in our lives when they help us serve God as part of the Jewish people" [8].

Thus, Alex-Li learns to control his desires and to transcend his temptations. When the Jewish tradition argues that temptations are part of human life, the belief goes back to Adam and Eve. Being tempted the couple committed the sin by breaking God's commandment. The history of temptation begins here. The Jewish belief on temptation is, perhaps, based on this fundamental assumption. However, a perfect man is someone who can overcome the temptation that s/he is aware of.

Alex-Li, in a way, can be compared to Herman Hesse's protagonist in the novel *Siddhartha*. Siddhartha, who was once involved in the pleasures of wine, women and wealth, renounces all temptations in the company of the River, thereby being elevated to a heavenly position unattained by his friend who is the disciple of Buddha [9]. Similarly, Alex-Li, who was under the spell of temptations, renounces them all at the end of the novel. He realizes that these temptations lead him nowhere and it is God who forms the concrete whole. Even though Alex-Li does not attain a

transcended position like Siddhartha, he, however, stands high above others during the prayer. The crowd includes Adam, the mystic Jew; the Jewish religious leaders, Rabbi Mark Rubinfine, Rabbi Burston, Rabbi Green, Rabbi Darvick; and all his friends and his mother Sarah Tandem, who wants him to say Kaddish for his father. Thus, Alex-Li cannot understand the mundane behavior of the people gathered there to attend the Kaddish. When knowledge dawns on Alex-Li reality overcomes fantasy and he writes Li-Jin's name elevated above the names of the popular philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the popular novelist Virginia Woolf at the end of the novel.

Thus, Alex-Li learns to control his desires. At this point, he realizes that it is religion/faith in God that forms the centre of existence in every human being. Thus, here we find the three elements of "self" clearly revealed – the centre being Alex-Li's Jewish self/voice, the non-centre being the goyish voices that surrounds him and the realization of the two brings about the relation between the centre and the non-centre: "The self, the, may be conceived as a multiple phenomenon of essentially three elements [...] a centre, a not-centre, and the relation between them" [2]. However, Bakhtin emphasizes, "the relation is never static, but always in the process of being made or unmade" [2]. It is based on this idea that one finds Alex-Li's understanding of the centre (self) and the non-centre (other) is different at the beginning of the novel.

Thus, the novel can be seen as a purely and highly religious novel with history infused into its texture. It is, perhaps, to this factor that the chapter headings of Book One point. The ten chapters are titled after the ten holy spheres in Jewish tradition, each containing a divine attribute. These chapters give a good insight into the religious and historical background of the Jewish culture and tradition, at the same time present the irreconcilable fate of Alex-Li Tandem.

IV. ALEX-LI TANDEM AND KITTY ALEXANDER

Another way of viewing this relation is by considering Alex-Li's experience in life with Kitty Alexander. In the beginning of the novel Alex-Li was an ardent worshipper of the great American film celebrity Kitty Alexander. He even has a folder in his "box of trick" (Alex-Li's term for a 'computer') called KITTYLETRS that represents the only evidence he has of thousands of words he has written over years" [5]. The first Epigraph at the beginning of "Book Two – *Roebling Heights: The Zen of Alex-Li Tandem*", perhaps, points to the sort of life that Alex-Li considers important, "You see, this is my life. It always will be. There's nothing else. Just us, and the cameras—and those wonderful people out there in the dark" [5].

In his attempt to meet Kitty, Alex-Li learns that it is Max Krauser, the President of Kitty Association in America, who prevents him from meeting Kitty. Max was Kitty's scriptwriter, and then later became her agent. He was also a homosexual and was Kitty's husband at one point of time. Kitty even admits that "Max ... himself is a little crazy" [5]. However, he seems to be an autocrat, for it is he who decides what Kitty should do and what she shouldn't.

Kitty seems to be confused in her actual feelings for Max.

At one point she tells Alex-Li that "it is only Max who worries for me" [5]. Immediately after telling this she also tells Alex-Li that "Max barely allows me to leave the house [...] I am like a prisoner now ... (I'm not even allowed outside with Lucia!); an increasingly restricted, lonely life [...]" [5]. Kitty trusts the "overprotective Max" [5] too much that she believes that "there is nothing malicious in Max. I don't think he is capable of [...] hurting me" [5]. However, Kitty's opinion turns out to be an irony at the end. Thus, in Kitty, too, one finds two voices in work – the trusting voice and the fearing voice of a celebrity.

Seeing Kitty in a helpless situation, Alex offers to help her out from the clutches of the tyrant, Max. Alex-Li offers to save Kitty from Max and promises her a new life. He decides to earn her a good amount by selling her signature, for he knew that people will buy Kitty's signature for eight thousand dollars. Thus, here, one phase in Alex-Li's life ends: "the end of something over there, the beginning of something over here" [5]. Now the reader can see the transformation in Alex-Li becoming prominent – from a mere collector of autographs he becomes the savior of the famous movie celebrity Kitty Alexander.

However, he is shocked with the news on the television reporting Kitty's death given by Max. A second thought prevents him from correcting the fake report. He thought it is the best opportunity for him to make a handsome amount of money for Kitty. The "slow, malicious game" of autograph collection corrupts Alex-Li's mind for a short period of time. This brings about the complete change in his life. He realizes that hiding the fact that Kitty is not dead from the world is the cruelest deed, which he does to Kitty. Guilt haunts him and decides not to work again. In his last autograph fair he earned sixty-five thousand pounds for Kitty. However, he remains numb for the praises showered on him.

The guilt-stricken Alex-Li kept his word – he made Kitty independent. Now she can go and live anywhere in the world without the fear of being ruled by Max, "It's your money [...] Take it, Kitty. Take it and bloody run" [5]. As Kitty leaves him, Alex-Li understands that fame is nothing but a momentary gain that can vanish at any time depriving the person his individuality. At this point he turns to God, who is the ultimate constant entity.

From a different perspective, the novel revolves around Alex-Li's craving to communicate with Kitty Alexander, a woman he knows and loves solely through her career as an actress. At the same time, he has a profound incapacity to communicate successfully with his real-life girlfriend Esther. Even when the car crashes in which Alex-Li and Esther was travelling, the first thing he did was to check if he still had the autograph of Kitty Alexander. His passion for autographs makes him say, "If this house was burning I'd take my autographs before anything else [...]" [5]. Infact, much of the novel is committed to Alex-Li's evading of his real-life love, Esther, as he goes to America, where situations conspire to help him to meet Kitty Alexander. He even misses being by Esther's side at the hospital after her pacemaker has been replaced so that he can trade autographs across the other side of the Atlantic.

Thus, when many see it as a novel on fame and celebrity, there is another group for whom it is man's unending quest

to find his ultimate 'self'. The chapter headings in Book-Two of the novel are symbolic of this. The titles are taken from Kakuan, a Zen master who lived from the 11th century to the 12th century, who wrote the verses to accompany the "The Ox-herding Pictures". In the Ten Ox-herding Pictures a little child and an ox are depicted. The ox is the essential 'self' that every man is seeking. The little child represents the 'self' of the phenomenal world which wants to grasp the essential 'self' – not through concepts and thoughts, but as it really is. This child is always seeking something. It wants money, status and fame. But life is more than all this. This basic idea provides the structure for the second half of the novel. Here, Kitty Alexander is the "Bull" who represents money, status and fame; and Alex-Li Tandem is the "Child" seeking for these [10].

V. CONCLUSION

Zadie Smith sets up her protagonist on a spiritual quest, its two strands unwinding from his Jewish-Goyish nature: Alex-Li's search for reconciliation with the fact of his father's loss and for the truth about Kitty's signature. The structure of this spiritual quest seems to have been derived from Kabbalah, the tradition of Jewish mystical thought studied by Adam. On the wall of Adam's flat twenty-two letters of Hebrew alphabets are painted and beneath them the words "the word is broken" [5]. This refers to the 'tsimtsum', one of the Kabbalah's basic concepts, the act by which God, the perfect form of everything, withdrew part of himself to make space for finite creation. The world is, thus, incomplete; just like Alex-Li's world is "broken" since the death of his father. It is the duty of the believers to restore the world by their good actions, and it is a son's duty to get through the loss of his father. Alex-Li, finally, succeeds in coming out of his father's death and restores the good things in his world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I thank Mr. NK for his ardent support and timely advices.

I also thank sincerely my parents for their constant encouragement.

REFERENCES

- [1] M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in novel," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Ed. Vincent B Leitch, New York: Norton, 2001, pp. 1192-1220.
- [2] M. Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, 1990, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 18-29.
- [3] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, New Delhi: Harcourt India, 2001, pp. 62-64.
- [4] The Observer. (January 16 2000). [Online]. Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/jan/16/fiction.zadiesmith>
- [5] Z. Smith, *The Autograph Man*, New York: Penguin, 2002.
- [6] J. Acocella. (Sept-Oct 2005). Race and relations in Zadie Smith's new novel. *The New Yorker Magazine*. [Online]. Available: <http://bechollashon.org/database/index.php?article/273>
- [7] M. H. Paganoni. Zadie Smith's new ethnicities. *Dossier Studi Culturali*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.club.it/culture2003/maria-christiapaganoni/corpo.tx.paganoni.html>
- [8] E. B. Borowitz, *Understanding Judaism*, New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1979, pp. 14-19.
- [9] H. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, U.S.: New Directions, 1951.
- [10] *The Autograph Man: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Continuum International. [Online]. Available: http://www.authortrek.com/the_autograph_man_page.html



Greeshma Peethambaran is a native of Irinjalakuda in Kerala was born on 18 September 1982. She took her M.Phil (2007) in English from the University of Madras after her M.A (2005) and & BA (2003) in English from the University of Calicut.

Teaching in centers of higher learning for the last six years, she is presently Assistant Professor and Head of the English Department at Acharya Institute of Graduate Studies, Bangalore, India, affiliated to the University of Bangalore. Her published papers include *Nature as Code and Content in Akam Poems* (RAYS: A Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, Vol. 7. No. 1, March 2009); *The Invisibility of the Translator in Mist* (The IUP Journal of English Studies, Vol. V, No. 3, 2010); and *The Politics and Poetics of Remapping Britain's Englishness* (Proceedings of U.G.C National Seminar at St. Josephs' College, Irinjalakuda, Kerala State, India, 2010). Her research interests include Translation and Film Studies.

Ms Greeshma is also a member of English Language Teachers' Interaction Forum (ELTIF), Kerala, India.