

Voice, Identity and Power: Jewish Immigrant Experience in the Select Novels of Anzia Yeziarska

Soniya¹, Dr. Vidya Dass²

¹M S, Research Scholar, Department of English, RVS College of Arts and Science

²Associate Professor, Department of English, RVS College of Arts and Science

Abstract

The works of Anzia Yezeirska often explore the themes of poverty, assimilation, gender roles, and the struggles of immigrant women seeking independence and self-fulfilment. Her works remains influential in discussions of immigration, feminism in Jewish-American literature.

Keywords: Gender roles, assimilation, poverty, immigration, feminism.

INTRODUCTION

Anzia Yeziarska (1880–1970) was a Jewish-American novelist known for her novels and short stories about the immigrant experience, particularly that of Jewish women in early 20th-century America. Born in Russian Poland, she immigrated to the U.S. as a child and grew up in the tenements of New York City's Lower East Side. Yeziarska's semi-autobiographical writings often focus on strong-willed female protagonists who challenge patriarchal and cultural constraints in pursuit of independence and self-fulfilment. She gained fame in the 1920s, earning the nickname "the Sweatshop Cinderella" due to her rise from a poor factory worker to a recognized writer. However, her popularity declined during the Great Depression, and she struggled financially later in life. In the 1950s, her work saw a revival, and she published an autobiography, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950), reflecting on her literary career and identity crisis as an immigrant writer. Yeziarska's work is now widely studied in American literature, women's studies, and Jewish-American studies for its powerful exploration of immigration, gender, and class.

Voice, Identity, and Power

The life of an immigrant is often a complex journey filled with challenges, hopes, and transformations. It typically involves adapting to a new culture, language barriers, economic struggles, and the pursuit of better opportunities. However, it also includes resilience, nostalgia for one's homeland, and the struggle to balance assimilation with preserving one's cultural identity. For many, immigration is driven by dreams of a better future whether for economic advancement, political freedom, or safety. However, the experience can be isolating due to discrimination, loneliness, and the difficulty of establishing a new support network. Over time, some immigrants integrate into their new society, while others maintain strong ties to their cultural roots.

Immigrants often live between two worlds, torn between preserving their cultural heritage and adapting to

the expectations of their new society. This dual identity can create feelings of isolation, as they struggle to belong in a place that often views them as outsiders. Many face discrimination in housing, employment, and education, making it difficult to achieve upward mobility. Women, in particular, experience a double burden, as they must navigate both societal prejudices and the patriarchal traditions of their own communities. Despite these hardships, immigrants display remarkable perseverance, forming close-knit communities that offer support and solidarity. Over time, some manage to rise above poverty, but success often comes at great personal cost, such as severed family ties or the loss of cultural identity.

Anzia Yeziarska's works vividly capture these struggles, portraying the tension between old and new, tradition and change, hope and disillusionment in the immigrant experiences in the works like *Bread Givers*, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, *Arrogant Beggar* and *All I Could Never Be*. Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* stands as a defining novel of Jewish American literature, depicting the harsh realities of immigrant life on New York's Lower East Side. Published in 1925, the novel reflects Yeziarska's own experiences as a Jewish immigrant struggling against poverty, gender expectations, and the pressures of assimilation.

Bread Givers explores the struggles of Sara Smolinsky, a Jewish immigrant in early 20th-century New York, as she seeks independence from her domineering father, Reb Smolinsky. Torn between Old World traditions and the promise of the American Dream, Sara rejects her father's rigid patriarchal beliefs and pursues education, despite immense hardship. Her journey highlights the generational conflict between immigrant parents and their American-born children, particularly the limited roles imposed on women. While Reb Smolinsky clings to religious ideals, leaving his family in poverty, Sara embraces self-reliance, becoming a teacher and securing her own future. The novel critiques gender inequality and questions whether the American Dream is truly accessible to immigrants. Through symbols like bread, representing both nourishment and oppression, Yeziarska portrays the sacrifices required for autonomy. Ultimately, *Bread Givers* is a powerful exploration of resilience, identity, and the cost of forging one's own path.

Arrogant Beggar critiques the hypocrisy of philanthropy and the struggle for dignity among poor Jewish immigrants. The novel follows Adele Lindner, a young woman who enters the Hellman Home for Working Girls, expecting support but finding condescension. The wealthy benefactors use charity to reinforce social hierarchy, demanding gratitude rather than fostering true independence. Adele rejects this system, striving for self-respect and economic autonomy. She encounters intellectual men fascinated by her immigrant background but unwilling to see her as an equal. The novel exposes the false promises of the American Dream, particularly for working-class women, and critiques both capitalism and charity as systems that perpetuate inequality. Drawing from Yeziarska's own experiences, *Arrogant Beggar* offers a feminist and immigrant perspective on power, identity, and self-reliance. It stands as a bold critique of early 20th-century reform movements and the limits of upward mobility for marginalized communities.

Red Ribbon on a White Horse is Anzia Yeziarska's autobiographical novel, reflecting on her struggles as an immigrant writer. She recounts her journey from poverty to literary fame in the 1920s, including her disillusioning experience in Hollywood working for Samuel Goldwyn. Despite success, she feels alienated, torn between artistic integrity and financial survival. The novel explores identity, gender, and the American Dream, showing how success often demands personal compromises. Yeziarska critiques both capitalism and socialism, rejecting external systems that promise fulfilment but ultimately exploit individuals. She also examines the difficulties of being a female writer in a male-dominated world. Unlike her earlier fiction, which focused on immigrant characters, this introspective work lays bare her own disappointments and resilience. A powerful reflection on ambition and self-worth, *Red Ribbon on a White*

Horse serves as both a personal confession and a broader critique of American ideals.

All I Could Never Be is a semi-autobiographical novel exploring the conflict between immigrant identity and assimilation into American high society. The protagonist, Sara Andelman, a passionate Jewish immigrant, gains recognition for her writing and is introduced to elite intellectual circles. However, she soon realizes that success does not erase her outsider status. Sara's love affair with an upper-class man exposes the divide between her working-class immigrant roots and the privileged world she aspires to enter. She struggles with the realization that true belonging in that world requires sacrificing her heritage and values. The novel critiques the American Dream, showing how upward mobility often comes at the cost of personal identity. It also highlights gender and class struggles, emphasizing the barriers faced by women and immigrants. Ultimately, Sara chooses self-respect over assimilation, reflecting Yeziarska's own struggles with fame, poverty, and artistic integrity.

Conclusion

Bread Givers, Red Ribbon on a White Horse, Arrogant Beggar and All I Could Never Be—collectively illuminate the struggles of Jewish immigrants with poverty, assimilation, and gendered oppression. Through her poignant narratives and deeply personal characters, Yeziarska captures the tension between Old World traditions and New World aspirations, highlighting both the promise and disillusionment of the American Dream. Her heroines, often mirroring Yeziarska's own experiences, embody resilience and ambition as they seek autonomy and self-expression in a society that marginalizes them. Ultimately, Yeziarska's works serve as a vital literary bridge between immigrant narratives and feminist discourse, offering timeless insights into identity, agency, and the pursuit of belonging.

References:

1. Yeziarska, Anzia. Bread Givers. Doubleday, Page & Company. 1925.
2. Yeziarska, Anzia. Arrogant Beggar. Viking Press. 1927.
3. Yeziarska, Anzia. Red Ribbon on a White Horse. Viking Press. 1950.
4. Yeziarska, Anzia. All I Could Never Be. Viking Press. 1955.