



# Philo-Semitic Representation of Jewish Nationalism and Identity in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*

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**Abstract**—This paper explores *Daniel Deronda*, which is a political novel where Eliot openly takes a stand for the Jewish cause and provides her solution to the Jewish Question. Eliot attempts to reveal through her book that Judaism which seems to have lost its fervour (due to Jewish conversions and expulsions), is not lost and remains at the very core of Jewish hearts and values. Through various instances in the novel, Eliot supports Jewish nationalism and their struggle for identity and rebukes British racial dominance and the literary antisemitic tradition.

**Keywords**—*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Identity, Jewish, Nationalism, Philo-Semitism

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 1870s was a relatively good time for the Jews all over Europe. While Eliot was writing *Daniel Deronda*, England was governed by Benjamin Disraeli, serving as the Prime Minister for two consecutive terms. That was the time when Europe alternated laws governing Jewish inequality. George Eliot was an Anglican and a religious reader influenced by the readings of the Bible (Abrahams). Eliot's attitude towards Jews changed during her encounter with several Jewish scholars during her visit to Germany. She was heavily influenced by Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*, which "made a profound impression and deflected her mind from former mental attitudes to new appearances" (Abrahams 54) and taught her "religious tolerance" (Abrahams 54). Her understanding of the Jewish cause began when she met Emanuel Deutsch, a scholar of Semantics and the Talmud, also a writer of Jewish subjects, in 1866. Eliot assisted Deutsch in editing his papers on the Jewish matter (Green).

David Kauffman, in 1888, describes Eliot's treatment of Judaism in *Daniel Deronda* as a "glorious exaltation" (Meyer 733). On November 29, 1876, Eliot, in her letter to Mrs Beecher Stowe wrote that, through her novel, she wanted "... to treat Jews with such sympathy and

understanding as my nature could attain to..." (Abrahams 59). *Daniel Deronda* got published when political debates on Jewish assimilation were at their peak. *Daniel Deronda* is a political novel where Eliot openly takes a stand for the Jewish cause and provides her solution to the Jewish Question. Eliot attempts to reveal through her book that Judaism which seems to have lost its fervour (due to Jewish conversions and expulsions) is not lost and remains at the very core of Jewish hearts and values. Through various instances in the novel, Eliot supports Jewish nationalism and their struggle for identity. Although the Jews underwent political and economic emancipation, their condemnation seemed inevitable (Green). Eliot rebukes British racial dominance and the literary antisemitic tradition.

The literary trend of the sympathetic portrayal of the Jews began by the end of the eighteenth century. George Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, got published in 1876 and is also her most controversial novel. Jewish characterisation in *Daniel Deronda* is in sharp contrast to Jewish characterisation in other literary texts of the era. *Daniel Deronda* was written at a time in which Jews were tolerated but condemned. Where on one hand Fagin is a customary and an archetypal villain, Deronda in Eliot's

*Daniel Deronda* is a romantic Jew; the torchbearer of Zionism who is possessed with the idea “of restoring a political existence to my people, making them a nation again, giving them a national centre ... That is a task which presents itself to me as a duty: ... I am resolved to devote my life to it” (Eliot 803).

## II. A PHILO-SEMITIC NOVEL

The novel is primarily pro-Jewish, with idealistic Jewish characters, reflecting sympathy and acceptance towards Jewish rituals and practices. It is a psychological novel highlighting the plight and aspirations of the Jews. At the time when *Daniel Deronda* was written, Eliot was in favour of Jewish assimilation as a solution to the Jewish question. Eliot took a rather more positive and liberal approach to represent her Jewish characters in the novel. Eliot's Philo-Semitism kindled from her relationship with Jews and Philo-Semites, her interest in Jewish history, her Jewish connections and acquaintances and her growing detest of English antisemitism (Levenson 131). John Blackwood, her publisher, said, “The whole tribe of Israel should fall and worship her [Eliot]” (Abrahams 59), which the Jews did. Eliot's representation of the Jews in *Daniel Deronda*, especially of Daniel, brought her heartfelt support from Jews all over the world, so much so that the main cities of Israel including Tel Aviv named their streets after George Eliot.

Although Eliot's husband comments that “The Jewish element seems to me likely to satisfy nobody (Hookman)”, Shmuel Verses writes, “For Jews everywhere, the book has a very special place in the history of fiction (Levenson 129)”. *Daniel Deronda* is recognised as a pro-Jewish and a Philo-Semitic novel portraying idealistic Jewish characters where Eliot breaks the antisemitic literary tradition of her times and expresses her sympathies towards Jewish nationalism, aspirations, identity, customs and traditions. (Levenson 130).

Eliot rebukes the continuous production of negative Jewish stereotypes in English literature. “Eliot was not a Jewish writer; she did not write a Jewish book. But Eliot wrote Philo-Semitic books- complicated and problematic- like good literature always is” (Levenson 151).

## III. QUEST FOR IDENTITY

Daniel is introduced as a Mathematics graduate in Cambridge who soon loses his interest in the field to “pursue a more independent line of study”. Daniel wants “to be an Englishman, but wants to understand other points of view. And wants to get rid of a merely English attitude in studies” (Eliot 183). Daniel's will to break free sets him on a path of self-revelation.

Levenson comments on the Jewish dilemma of the Victorian era. Through Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, he explores Jewish dilemmas about conversion in the wake of emancipation and the treatment of the converts. He also emphasises the writer's pro-Zionist sentiments and her aversion to the Marrano. *Daniel Deronda* received a lot of criticism regarding its pro-Jewish projections. Jewish population on the other hand enthusiastically received the novel. Some critics argue that the Christianised version of Jewish characters in the novel portrays both positive and negative traits. Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* aimed at rejuvenating Victorian society and culture and re-establishing the Jewish national identity.

Baron brings forth a major concern of the Jewish dilemma of conversion, and loss of identity and culture in the name of emancipation. He observes that in *Daniel Deronda* George Eliot:

sees the disintegration of Jewry as springing from the decline of Judaism which has been the real cohesive force among the Jewish people for centuries. Through the mouth of one of her characters, she declares that the hunger of the Jews to make money, which they see as their principal means of defence and betterment, is a curse upon them (Baron).

Many Christians attempted to divide the Jews into two categories, the good and bad, the Sephardim and Ashkenazim. In exploring the two Jewish types, Levenson correlates Sephardim and Ashkenazim to Marranism and Martyrdom. Sephardim Jews were those who, were affected by Jewish expulsion in 1492 and conversions in 1497 and were recognised as little less than Jews and liberals. Ashkenazim Jews were traditional Jews considered unfit for Jewish assimilation due to their orthodox beliefs and upbringing.

The type detested by both Sephardim and Ashkenazim Jews is the apostate, one who shows his back to religion and faith. *Daniel Deronda* portrays two apostates in a negative light, Lapidoth and Leonora Eberstein. Lapidoth is an immoral Jew, a renegade who gambles and sells his daughter into prostitution. Leonora is a crypto-Jew who hides her identity behind a German name - “I was baptised; I made myself like the people I lived among”. She is constantly haunted by her Jewish past. Eliot portrays renegades as talented characters but does not sympathise with them since they have no roots and connectivity with their culture and the religion they were born it, thus leading to their lack of moral and spiritual guidance.

Except for a few, Eliot's “Jewish Circle” was Ashkenazim. Eliot's unbiased portrayal of both Sephardim (Daniel Deronda) and Ashkenazim (Mordecai) Jews makes it a

downright Philo-Semitic novel (Levenson 136). Eliot lauds Marranos (a Spanish word for 'pigs' (Abrahams 56)) who, attempt to hide their Jewish identity. Daniel Deronda is an anti-Marrano, the one who does not hide his Jewish identity but is rather in search of it. Daniel's quest for and loyalty toward the Jewish themes reveals his curiosity to embrace his identity rather than conceal it. *Daniel Deronda* is the opposite of a crypto-Jew.

Deronda's dilemma to choose between Gwendolen and Mirah is symbolic of his dilemma to choose between Englishness and Jewishness (Mendelssohn 189). Deronda as a crypto-Jew is the cause of his conflicting identity. The novel ends with the marriage of Mirah and Daniel, which symbolises the union of Sephardim and Ashkenazim Jews. Through their union, Eliot highlights the communal belonging and interconnectedness of Sephardim and Ashkenazim Jews. The union of Mirah and Daniel is further symbolic of an intra-Jewish bond and Jewish-Christian amiability.

Century-long anti-Jewish myths, superstitions and prejudices, and supersessionism made people believe that Judaism has lost its cause to Christianity. Eliot rejects this belief and asserts that Judaism is an ongoing reality. Several instances in the novel claim that "Deronda, like his neighbours, had regarded Judaism as a sort of eccentric fossilized form ... the hitherto neglected reality that Judaism was still something throbbing in human lives, still making for them the only conceivable vesture of the world". The dying of Mordecai is symbolic of a fading Jewish cause which is revived by the reincarnation of Mordecai as Daniel Deronda, who would take the Jewish cause forward.

Eliot believes that the disintegration of Jews from Judaism is due to the Jewish zeal to make money which will only bring them doom. She firmly believes Judaism to be a cohesive force amongst Jews, which would lead to their regeneration (Baron 11). Eliot applauds Deronda's endeavours to leave his Englishness in search of his identity and of his people and to build their nation.

#### IV. JEWISH NATIONALISM

Eliot sets her novel in Frankfurt, Germany, a place inhabited by German, Spanish, French and Arab Jews. Daniel's decision to travel eastwards is symbolic of his journey towards the Holy Land, Palestine. Many instances in the novel highlight the desire to travel to the east. Deronda informs Gwendolyn, "I am going to the East to become better acquainted with the condition of my race in various countries there" (Eliot 803). Ezra comments, "Besides, I will imagine myself in the East, since I am getting ready to go there someday" (Eliot 789). Jewish nationalism lies at the heart of the novel. While

emphasising the East, Eliot points towards the authentic homeland of the Jews and her support for Jewish nationalism.

Eliot's belief in restoring the Jewish homeland finds its bearer in Ezra and Daniel. Ezra is a spiritual guide to Daniel who helps him learn more about Judaism and believes Daniel to be his successor who would continue his struggle towards the Holy Land. Through characters like Daniel, Eliot restores her belief in Jews like Ezra and Daniel, who would dedicate themselves to the Jewish cause.

#### V. CONCLUSION

When George Eliot came to write *Daniel Deronda*, she realised that Victorian culture was on a moral decline, on a road towards decadence with a strong influence of cosmopolitanism and materialism. Eliot further asserts the affirmation of Jewish loyalty towards their culture and religion. Eliot objects to the denial of one's Jewishness. Christianity's attempt to convert the Jews failed, and when Christians realised that it was almost impossible to convert the Jews, they rendered the Jew blind to faith, one that had not seen the light yet. Before antisemitism held its ground, intermarriage served the purpose of conversion and provided an answer to the Jewish question.

Various real-life Jewish influences on Eliot determined the location of the novel, along with Jewish characterisations. Her encounter with many Jews changed her perception of them, and she was openly upright for the Jewish cause. Through her novel, Eliot rejects the English racial domination and romanticisation of Marranos, the Sephardim Jews. Eliot celebrates the Jewish zeal to stay firm and connected with their religion and culture and condemns renegades who trade off their culture for materialistic desires. Eliot condemns the prejudiced portrayal of Jews in English literary tradition. She further supports Jewish nationalism and the Jewish desire to travel to the East to build their nation and political identity. Through *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot reveals her sympathies toward the Jewish cause.

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