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Immigrant Identity in *Absurdistan*

People born and raised in the United States grow up with the belief that America is a “melting pot” of different cultures and people. This belief has existed in the American mind since the very founding of the country and has continued to exist in the minds of American citizens throughout the ages. However, this belief that the United States is a true welcoming country is not the whole truth. The United States continues to propagate the myth of welcoming people of all cultures, when in reality, there is a well-established system for keeping foreign individuals from becoming American citizens. In the novel *Absurdistan*, by Gary Shteyngart, the protagonist Misha Vainberg becomes involved in this challenging system. *Absurdistan* is presented as a commentary on immigrant identity in the United States through Misha's encounters with immigration barriers, cultural assimilation, and American nativism.

The obstacles that prevent Misha from entering America represent the immigration barriers created by the US government. There are many layers of deterrents that hinder potential immigrants from entering the United States. Government organizations such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and Border Patrol are all state entities that contribute to the hurdles facing immigrants such as Misha Vainberg. These administrations give the federal government the means to limit and control the immigrant population (Behdad 9). In *Absurdistan*, Misha encounters difficulty with the INS when they bar his reentry to the United States due to the fact that his father murdered an American businessman

(Shteyngart 14). Criminalization as a reason to impede immigrants' entry to the United States has become a common tactic for thwarting potential immigrants (Behdad 9). However, this is simply another excuse for controlling the influx of immigrants entering the United States. Shteyngart's satirical voice on this topic can also be heard in his translation of "English legalese" for Russian visa applicants: "You're all whores and bandits, so why bother trying?" (Shteyngart 68). This "translation" is an expression of the unwelcoming sentiment conveyed by the United States toward potential immigrants. The overall unwelcoming attitude exemplifies yet another immigration barrier, but it also conveys the idea that immigrants are perceived to be unacceptable in their native condition and must be different in order to adhere to American standards.

Cultural assimilation is another issue of immigrant identity that Misha faces in *Absurdistan*. The United States demands that immigrants part with their native culture in order to become American, despite claims that America is a cultural melting pot. "Newcomers have been 'domesticated' and forced to lose their native 'skins' to become American citizens," (Behdad 12). Behdad states that political and cultural assimilation has been a companion to the immigrant identity since the founding of the United States. In the mind of America, the transition from immigrant to citizen is contingent upon assimilation to the American way of life. (Behdad 13). The manner in which Misha Vainberg embraced American culture is an instance of enthusiastic assimilation. In fact, Misha's enthusiasm is almost an overcompensation for his desire to assimilate, as seen in the humorously exaggerated rapping between Misha and Alyosha-Bob (Shteyngart 5). Misha's unconscious desire to assimilate is perhaps best seen in his desire for an "ethnic girlfriend" in order to complete the image of an American life (Shteyngart 28). The idea that an immigrant must wholeheartedly embrace the American culture in order to become

American is in part related to the inherent American belief of nativism and the notion that all non-American entities are unacceptable.

The continued acknowledgement that Misha is not American is another issue of immigrant identity, specifically the exclusive nature of American nativism. Behdad defines nativism as “an intense opposition to the minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e. ‘un-American’) connections,” (Behdad 10). This means that the American mindset is somewhat xenophobic. The result of this phenomenon is that the definition of immigrant policy and American citizenship are influenced by the favoritism toward natural “ideal” citizens (Behdad 10). Consequently, by definition an “immigrant” is innately foreign and distinctly “un-American,” especially in contrast with a native citizen. In *Absurdistan*, Misha self-identifies as an “exemplary American” who is merely trapped in the form of an overweight Russian male (Shteyngart 15). However, despite his desire to become American, he is continuously recognized as Russian or different from other Americans. For example, Misha is associated with his Russian background at his internship at the art foundation and his heritage is used as a reason to keep him employed (Shteyngart 28). Additionally, his father acknowledged that Misha would never be recognized as an American and that he would never stop being a Jew (Shteyngart 17). The label of “Jew” or “Russian” follows Misha throughout his travels, which shows that he is always identified as an outsider, despite his own convictions.

Misha's experiences with immigration barriers, cultural assimilation, and American nativism in *Absurdistan* are presented in a quite unique manner for commentary on immigrant identity in the United States. Although the language of the novel is humorous and exaggerated in classic satirical fashion, the content of the novel addresses the issue of immigrant identity in the United States rather well. By exposure to the material through satire, the important contents can

be absorbed and understood more readily by an audience that may not enjoy straight information. Therefore, with the amusing storyline of Shteyngart's characters and his creative expertise as an author, *Absurdistan* creates an opportunity for readers to enjoy learning about immigrant identity issues in the United States.

Bibliography

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