

# Reflection of Jewish Identity in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*

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## Abstract

The Present paper highlights how Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* focuses on the Jewish identity in the twenty-first century American Literature. Jewish Identity is the objective or subjective state of perceiving oneself as a Jew and relating to being Jewish. It does not need to imply religious orthodoxy, and it can be cultural in nature. Chabon's works have characterized the themes such as nostalgia, divorce, abandonment, fatherhood, and most notably issues of Jewish Identity. His novels also include gay, bisexual, and Jewish characters in his work. The novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* delineates the lives of two Jewish cousins, Czech artist Joe Kavalier and Brooklyn-born writer Sammy Clay, before, during, and after World War II. The novel is set in the 1930s and 1940s about magic, manhood, superheroes, and growing up Jewish in America. In this novel, the two Jewish cousins Kavalier and Clay struggled in the comic industry for their identity. It also concentrates to identify the Jewish identity in the light of the struggles of the protagonists, who are trying to eliminate their fragmented identity and achieve a sense of wholeness.

**Keywords:** Jewish identity, Bisexual, Metaphor, Sociological, Civilization, Cultural.

## INTRODUCTION

Michael Chabon is a contemporary American novelist, screenwriter, columnist, and short story writer. American literature is predominantly written or produced The Thirteen Colonies on the present-day eastern coast of the United States were greatly impacted by British literature prior to the foundation of the United States. As a result, the American literary tradition is a component of the larger English-language literary tradition. Other immigrant languages have a tiny body of literature. His works created in the United States and its predecessor colonies are considered American literature. It is essential for people's education since it reveals the country's culture and history. The literary

history of the United States is incomplete without Jewish American literature. It includes writing traditions in English, as well as other languages, the most prominent of which has been Yiddish. While many scholars and authors agree that there is a distinct corpus and practice of writing on Jewishness in America, many writers refuse to be labelled as Jewish voices.

The present paper deals with the quest for identity in Jewish Literature towards its change to Jewish American Literature. The reflection of past experiences like immigration, adjustment to the culture of Jews, and identity crisis in newly adopted Literature in the United States is highlighted here. The Holocaust's sufferings of Jews and the exhibition of its impact on Jewish American literature are

discussed, as well as how these conditions affected Jewish life in the United States in the current day. This paper conveys the anguish of Jewish people who were physically and mentally harmed in their own country as well as in other countries such as America. The following content demonstrates how culture and identity played a role in transforming Jewish literature into Jewish American literature.

Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. It depicts Jewish Identity in the two Jewish cousins' lives and their identity crisis in the comic book industry. The novel develops the story of Josef Kavalier and Sammy Clay the eldest son of a Jewish family. He grows up in Prague, where, along with his schooling as an artist at the Academy, where he quickly develops a gift for drawing, he is trained as an escape artist by the renowned Ausbrecher Bernard Kornblum. Josef reaches adolescence as World War II breaks out and Prague is occupied by Nazi Germany, where he comes to live with 17-year-old cousin Sammy Clayman. Sammy is the son of the Mighty Molecule, a strongman on the vaudeville circuit. Both Kavalier and Sammy find their creative niches, one entrepreneurial, the other's artistic. When Sammy discovers Joe's artistic ability, he hires him as an illustrator for Empire Novelty, a novelty products company. Sheldon Anapol, the owner of Empire, is trying to get into the comic-book market on Joe and Sammy's creative backs in order to share in Superman's recent cultural and financial success. Joe is trying to help his family flee Prague and has fallen in love with the bohemian Rosa Saks, who has her own artistic ambitions, while Sammy is trying to figure out his sexual identity and advance in his professional and literary career.

The Jewish ontology describes a world that differs from that it contains magical elements, the most prominent example in *Kavalier & Clay* is the Golem of Prague. The Golem is a mythical creature made of mud that is brought to life by a rabbi, much like the monster that was created by Doctor Frankenstein. Indeed it seems that the Golem is the Jewish equivalent

of a theme that is key to any religion and as old as mankind itself, namely the creation of life and the manipulation of death. In the Jewish religion, it is believed that a number of powerful rabbis were capable of creating a Golem through enchantments and prayer. This theme conflicts with the atheistic and a mythical character of our contemporary, and fictional-real, ontology. In Lyotard's words, the status of discursive and narrative knowledge although the primary mode of capturing and conveying knowledge is in decline in favour of objective, scientific knowledge, which is ranked higher in the social epistemological hierarchy.

### Objectives of the Study:

The objective of this study is to trace how Jewish Identity is reflected in Micheal Chabon's novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* and how the protagonists Kavalier and Clay struggle to identify their Jewish cultural identity. This research paper aims to bring the following objectives:

1. To study how Jewish Identity is effective in the novel to get a better kind of

Problem of twenty-first century's, moral, reality, and identity crisis.

2. To bring into focal point varied aspects of the novelist's language, experience,

vision, and from a different angle.

3. To find a realistic picture of Chabon's characters portrayed in the novel.

4. To study the lives of two Jewish cousins in the comic industry.

5. To recognize and undertake that the protagonist Josef Kavalier's life being Jewish

how he underwent the struggles for his identity.

6. To recognizes other protagonists Sammy Clay's sexual identity and his struggles

in Comic Book Industry.

### Scope of the Study:

The scope of the study is to identify the Jewish Identity through the major characters. Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*'s scope spans three decades and two continents, offering a peculiar view of the second half of the twentieth century: from pre World War II Prague, through the bustling, creative comic-book scene in New York and an American outpost in Antarctica during the war, to the suburban American Dream of the fifties and sixties. The novel supports an extremely varied cast, similar to E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, including mythical, historical, and fictional characters. The representation of history is a major topic in the novel, however, it is not merely a matter of poetics, but also politics. Denying traditional historiography implies the rejection of the traditional historiographic perspective. The novel is traced from the history of the Golden Age of Comic books and it comes as no surprise that the two heroes of the novel were inspired by several real-life comic characters. Chabon's novel is valuable for critique because it responds to multiple exigencies through Sammy's and Joe's creation of a performative Jewish hero. The superheroic escapist gets reduced to a common stereotype of performative Jewish identity, the clown. His creators, however, do establish their forms of self-affirmation by the end of the novel.

### Review of Literature:

David Moscovitz (2007), in his article "A Question of Transformational Chabon's Post Assimilatory Jewish Heroism in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*," reflects that the transformation as a condition of postmodern identity by examining performances of escape in Chabon's novel. The novel is a contemporary novel set within the historical context of the Second World War and the Nazi Third Reich. In this novel, two Jewish cousins create a popular comic hero, the Escapist, who repeatedly performs heroic feats of auto liberation. The escape function is not only a motive for Jewish heroism but also its heuristic, embodied in both literal and "dangerously metaphorical" ways. According to

Lee Behman, Chabon's narrative explores both heroic creators, as well as their creations, transforming themselves by self-reflexively casting attention toward their liberatory performances. Sammy identifies the common practice of heroic figures that perform dual or hidden identities. For example "Superman," is an ostensibly strong, anxiety-free gentile created by two American Jews in the 1930s, was really, behind that guise, an exile from a destroyed civilization. Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* is valuable for cultural critique because it responds to multiple exigencies through Sammy's and Joe's creation of a per-formative Jewish hero. The superheroic escapist gets reduced to a common stereotype of performative Jewish identity, the clown. However, creators do establish their forms of self-affirmation by the end of the novel.

Andrea Levine (2011), in her article, "Embodying Jewishness at the Millennium in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*" deals that Jewishness was more readily distinguished from normative "whiteness" and Americans than it is today. *Kavalier and Clay* is Chabon's account of two cousins, the Brooklyn-born Sammy Clayman and the Czech wartime refugee, Josef Kavalier who together create a successful comic strip featuring a superhero named "The Escapist." The Characters Kavalier and Clay reflect on the moral position of the Jewish American author concerning the memory of the European Holocaust. Though we understand that the pervasive theme of escape in the novel testifies to Chabon's "defense" of "escapism" as a legitimate, even desirable response to the horrors of reality. Chabon Shows Kavalier is a kind of hero to Sammy and serves as the prototype for the escapist himself. From the characters Sammy, Jewishness is readily opposed to heteronormative masculinity; Josef is the exception, not the exemplary Jew.

Shu-li Chang (2014), in his article, "Superhero Comics and Everyday Heroics Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*" expresses that the story tells the two escape routes in the first half, Joe and Sam escape into superhero fantasies to protect

themselves from the traumas of history and life, we discover personal and historical, only to discover that they are only human, and thus defenseless against various social and historical forces that they cannot fend off or comprehend. They fled their tragedies in desperation, with Joe joining the army and Sam finding refuge in marriage. After two failed attempts to escape their traumas, they finally realize, in the second half of the novel that the redemption they seek can only be found in the very thing they are trying so desperately to flee. They have been created and their dissatisfaction with their own identities has made them restless, and they have grown tired of history's hollow promises. This understanding complicates any deterministic understanding of identity or history, exposing at the same time that the ground of identification is nothing less than the miracle of love.

Frederik De Vadder (2016), in his article, "Jewish Identity in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*," reveals that the Jewish identity behind comic books was completely unknown. The novel tells the story of Josef Kavalier, the eldest son in a Jewish family. He grows up in Prague, where, along with his schooling as an artist at the Academy, where he quickly develops a gift for drawing. He is trained as an escape artist by the renowned Ausbrecher Bernard Kornblum. Josef reaches adolescence as World War II breaks out and Prague is occupied by Nazi Germany. In the case of *Kavalier & Clay*, the otherness can be brought back to two dimensions Yiddishkayt or Jewishness, and comic-book Literature. The former constitutes the text's Jewish identity, whereas the latter defines the poetical stance taken by the text. These two dimensions are more intertwined than the dichotomy he has just proposed suggests, as there is a strong bond between Jewishness and the birth of the comic-book genre. The character of Superman depicts a Jew's identity and the theme of perpetual alienation. Banished from his mother country, the wandering Jew keeps searching for a place to call home. He is a member of the chosen people, who have been greatly tested so that they may prove their worthiness. Whereas Kal-El's Superman identity reflects Jewish images

and themes of mythical proportion, Clark Kent leads the life of the average American. This sense of escapism is further strengthened by the incorporation of a Jewish and comic-book ontology.

Luke Brown (2016), in his article, "Jewish Archetypes, Self-Fashioning, and the Comic Book Genre in Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*" shows an immense historical space. It is extending from the streets of Nazi-occupied Prague to a solitary base in Antarctica, to pre-World War II Manhattan and its post-war suburbs. The novel's main protagonist, Josef Kavalier, traverses nations, genres, and ideologies in an attempt to find a stable home and a defined self. Kavalier and his cousin, Sammy Clay, bring about the golden age of comic books with their fantastical creations and innovative designs, only to become disenfranchised with the figures they created. Josef creates a persona for himself based on physical prowess, invulnerability, and escape, which reflect the style of masculinity promoted by Houdini in the decades prior. The escapism and release, bodily risk and mastery are strongly linked to questions of masculine power and identity," and it is for this reason that "primarily men and boys" gravitated to Houdini's escapes. Josef can fit himself into the post-World War II suburban family unit's hetero-normative ideal.

## Findings and Discussion:

### Jewish Identity in Literature:

Jewishness is defined by Progressive Judaism and Haymanot Judaism as having at least one Jewish parent. However, Karaite Judaism is solely paternal lineage used to determine Jewishness. Jewish American literature has a significant place in American literary history. It encompasses writing traditions in English as well as other languages, with Yiddish being the most renowned. In fact, many researchers have believed that there is a separate corpus and practice of writing on Jewishness in America, many writers refuse to be labelled as "Jewish voices." Many ostensibly Jewish writers, such as Isaac Asimov, cannot be considered

representative of Jewish American literature. Jewish Identity is the state of recognising oneself as a Jew and is tied to being Jewish, whether objective or subjective, is known as Jewish identity. In a broader sense, Jewish identity is not determined by others' perceptions of one's Jewishness or by a set of religious, legal, or sociological rules. Religious observance is not required for Jewish identity. As a result, it can be a cultural component of Jewish identity. Jewish identity includes ties to the Jewish community. Orthodox Judaism is founded on matrilineal ancestry. Jewish law considers those born to a Jewish mother to be Jewish, regardless of personal beliefs or level of compliance with Jewish law.

Contemporary writers such as Paul Auster, Michael Chabon, Ayelet Waldman, Joshua Cohen, Helen Epstein, Jonathan Safran Foer, Alan Kaufman, Nicole Krauss, Lev Raphael, and Art Spiegelman have continued to explore Jewish identity dilemmas in their works, focusing especially on the Holocaust and the ongoing assimilation and cultural rediscovery exhibited by younger generations of American Jews. Leon Uris's *Exodus* was possibly the most important American Jewish fiction forever. The story of the war to establish the modern state of Israel, which was translated into Russian, spurred hundreds of thousands of Russian immigrants to Israel. Modern Jewish American books commonly feature Jewish protagonists and address issues and themes relevant to Jewish American society, such as assimilation, Zionism/Israel, and anti-Semitism, among others, as well as the recent "New anti-Semitism" phenomenon.

Jewish Identity in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*:

The novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* reflects the quest for identity in the lives of two Jewish cousins. The novel follows the travails of Josef Kavalier, a teenager who escapes Nazi-occupied Prague hidden in the coffin of the Golem, with the help of his cousin, Sammy Clay, who narrates Josef's comic strips; he eventually becomes a financially successful comic book illustrator. With the support of the *Escapist*, a superhero

largely based on Harry Houdini, the protagonist (*Kavalier and Clay*) build a name for themselves in the Golden Age of comic books. In the middle of the silence and homophobia of 1940's America, everything seems bright; Rosa Saks is a lover of Kavalier who offers him the chance at an American family, while Tracy Bacon, the svelte young voice actor for the *Escapist*, offers Sammy the promise of a queer partnership. However, Josef's happiness is short-lived as his younger brother, Thomas, dies while fleeing to the United States. Josef joins the Army, causing Sammy to relocate to suburban America as Rosa's replacement spouse and the father figure to Josef's newborn kid. Both struggle with loss among the wider pain of the Holocaust, which is always present in the background.

The Golem of Prague, the most prominent example in *Kavalier & Clay*, is based on Jewish ontology, which posits a reality that varies from our readers, and has magical components. The Golem, like the monster produced by Doctor Frankenstein, is a mythological creature formed of mud that is brought to life by a rabbi. Indeed, the Golem appears to be the Jewish version of a motif that runs through all religions and it is as old as humanity itself: the creation of life and the manipulation of death. According to Jewish tradition, many prominent rabbis were capable of conjuring forth a Golem using enchantments and prayer. This idea clashes with our contemporary's atheistic and mystical nature, and Ontology, the fictional-real. In Lyotard's words, the primary mode of capturing and disseminating knowledge, discursive and narrative knowledge is losing ground to objective, scientific knowledge, which is positioned higher in the social epistemological hierarchy. However, the Jewish ontology of *Kavalier & Clay* is a different epistemology applies:

Every universe, our own included, begins in conversation. Every golem in the history of the world, from Rabbi Hanina's delectable goat to the river-clay Frankenstein of Rabbi Juddah Loew ben Bezalel, was summoned into existence through language [...] (TAKC 119)

The power of narrative and discourse is an important theme in *Kavalier & Clay*. The Golem is not merely a metaphor for creation, the act of breathing life into something, it is a pile of clay or a string of words, but it also is an actual character. As such, the Golem itself has been brought to life through the power of the word and enters the fictional real. Josef eventually returns to his place as head of the household thanks in part to the healing properties of the Golem, as Sammy packs up for greener climes on the West Coast. Chabon compares to the maker of a Golem: "The relationship between a golem and its creator is usually viewed as a metaphor for that between the work of art in my case, a novel - and its creator"(Maps and Legends 183) Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, links the themes of physical escape with the escapism found in comic books, magic, and Jewish folklore tinged with mysticism. He refers to the "bitter truth of golems" writing:

A golem, like a lie, is the expression of a wish: a wish for peace and security a wish for strength and control; a wish to know, in a tiny human way, a thousandth of a millionth of the joy and power of the Greater Creation. (TAKC 187)

Jewish identity attests to Chabon, "as magic has always been about the handling of secrets, about the pain, the destruction, and the marvellous liberation that can result when they are revealed" (TAKC 155). However, the novel is representing the Holocaust typically eschews the possibility of truly revealing secrets. Moreover, is it possible to ever feel "marvellous liberation" when writing of the Shoah Chabon's advocacy of escape from the Shoah is of course conditioned by time and space. He refers to himself as "a lucky man living in a lucky time in the luckiest country in the world" (TAKC 154). Chabon is of course writing as an American whose worldview is not drenched in the blood of Europe.

*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* mirrors anti-Semitic speech in history and actuality while also demonstrating Jewish self-assurance. Anti-Semitism concerning Golems Anti-Semites cast doubt on the Jewish people's

role as God's chosen people by portraying the Golem as inept, cruel, and dangerous. They attempted to deprive them of their chance at salvation by attacking the Jewish people as a whole. Chabon uses this as his entrée; a new Golem is built based on the story of Kavalier's rescue with the help of the Prague clay figurine, that is, an identity anti-image symbolising rebirth and strength, in contrast to the hegemonic cultural vision that it represents. It defects the Golem image to fight anti-Semitic groups' racial prejudice and to reaffirm the Jewish nation's subjectivity. Chabon's Golem story continues the subject of Jewish writers from the 19th and 20th centuries who developed Golem stories to convey the Jewish individual's imagination of the Jewish community. According to Chabon, some Jews are hesitant to send the golem away.

Chabon does not stop with allusions and continues the story of the Golem mythology where Rosenberg left off. Josef and his master, Kornblum, are charged with locating Loew's Golem, which they eventually find and successfully smuggle out of Prague by impersonating a recently murdered strongman. While the Golem is unable to rescue Prague's current Jewish population, it metaphorically saves Josef by allowing him to stow away under its enormous girth and pass across Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia's strictly regulated border. It portrays the Golem as Jewish protection and fixture of Eastern European provenance, other appearances of the golem to the development, appeal, and destruction of the work. When Josef draws a rendition of the Golem of Prague, he needs to sketch a comic book superhero to present a potential backer. Josef's retort reveals the conceit guiding the new growth of the comic book genre as a reapplication of the Golem's conceit. This example, like many others in the text, alludes to Jewish cultural touchstones that served as the ideological foundation of the comic book business during its heyday in the late 1940s. The lengthy link between the golem and comic book superheroes has persisted to this day, with various golem comics and a slew of characters, the most renowned of which is Marvel's Hulk, remaining as modernized Golems.

The reflection of Jewish identity is a major topic in Kavalier & Clay. However, it is not merely a matter of poetics, but also politics. Denying traditional historiography implies the rejection of the traditional historiographic perspective. Postmodern historiography has to adopt other perspectives, and it is exactly this otherness that defines these new perspectives; they are defined through their contrastive position about the dominant point of view. In the case of Kavalier & Clay, the otherness can be brought back to two dimensions: Yiddishkayt, or Jewishness, and comic-book literature. The former constitutes the text's Jewish identity, whereas the latter defines the poetical stance taken by the text. These two dimensions are more intertwined than the dichotomy. The researcher has proposed that there is a strong bond between Jewishness and the birth of the comic-book genre. As Sammy reveals that;

They're all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don't think he's Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing this name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself. (TAKC 585)

The creators of some of the first and most important comic-book series are Jews, whose Jewish identity is reflected in their creations. For example, Superman was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. It tells the story and adventures of Kal-El, an alien with superhuman powers from the planet Krypton, who was sent to earth by his father just before his home planet was destroyed. Kal-El is named Clark Kent by his foster parents. As such, Kal-El possesses a double identity. On the one hand, he is a costumed superhero arguably the first one of his kind. On the other hand, he is a journalist with a spectacularly normal life. It is not difficult to relate the character of Superman to the image of the wandering Jew and the theme of perpetual alienation. Banished from his mother country, the wandering Jew keeps searching for a place to call home. He is a member of the chosen people, who have been greatly tested so that they may prove their worthiness. Similarly, Kal-El's home planet Krypton has been destroyed and he is shipped off to an unknown world. Whereas Kal-El's

Superman identity reflects Jewish images and themes of mythical proportion, Clark Kent leads the life of the average American.

The novel generalises the Holocaust, making Europe's slain Jews a faceless, anonymous population whose remembrance may or may not be a blessing. Instead, race and embodiment remain key markers for "otherness" in these writings and are frequently the foundation of a detached, critical relationship to American national culture. This text makes clear that Jewish American national identity took shape only in relation to a fraught series of other racial and ethnic scenarios and was always haunted by matters of the body, as it was potentially gendered, queered, and disabled, by recasting Jewish racial identities through the play of "speculative thought."

### **Conclusion:**

Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* reflects how the characters Kavalier and Clay struggled with their identity in the comic industry and being Jewish. Most of the first generation struggled to get rid of their Jewish label; they focus their discussion on the assimilation of Jews into American society. The contemporary American Jewish writers have occupied a place in American society; they were able to express and reshape Jewish identity more confidently. Chabon wrote with the help of golems in "The Fantastic Adventures of Kavalier and Clay". It expounds on the connotation of the Jewish identity of contemporary American Jewish writers: with Jewish values as the core, in the inheritance of Jewish. Based on the national spirit, promote the two-way interaction and exchange between Jewish civilization and American culture, both in the social environment of the United States. Pursue the modernity of Jewish civilization in the environment, and understand American culture under the framework of Jewish civilization, to realize the integration of the two cultures. The connection between spiritual concepts and values will eventually lead to the integration of Jewish into the mainstream American discourse system and the

transformation of the goals of the American cultural landscape. The Identity Construction of Contemporary American Jewish Writers Shows the Jewishness of Contemporary American Jews Sex can no longer be considered purely from the perspective of Jewish religion or culture, but also from the perspective of American society in a broad sense. It is understood as the combination of Jewish nationality and American modernity, which reflects the development and coexistence of the Jewish Identity.

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