**The Question of Identity in Gary Shteyngart’s**

***Super Sad True Love Story***

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**Abstract**: In my paper I want to deal with Gary Shteyngart’s third novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) and the question of identity. The protagonist of the novel struggles to find his own identity and place in a strange new world. The task of my paper is to show his quest and its result.

**Keywords:** Identity, Jewish American identity, new world, meaning of life

In my paper I will deal with Gary Shteyngart’s third novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010). The novel won the *Salon* Book Award (Fiction, 2010) and the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize (2011). It was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year (Fiction & Poetry, 2010), *New York Times* bestseller (Fiction, 2010), and Amazon’s Best Books of the Month in August 2010. It was named one of the best books of the year by numerous publications, including *The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, San Francisco Chronicle, O: The Oprah Magazine,* Maureen Corrigan of *NPR,* and *Slate* (www.wikipedia.org).

According to Michiko Kakutani, “It’s a novel that gives us a cutting comic portrait of a futuristic America, nearly ungovernable and perched on the abyss of fiscal collapse, and at the same time it is a novel that chronicles a sweetly real love affair as it blossoms from its awkward, improbable beginnings” (“Love” C1 ).

The novel’s main character is Leonard or Lenny Abramov who begins his story in the following way: “Today I’ve made a major decision: *I am never going to die*”[[2]](#footnote-3) (*Super* 1). He is the son of Russian immigrants who had to leave their native Russia because of their Jewish origins. Lenny’s father became a janitor in the New World and because of his limited material resources Lenny was unable to go to a famous college. In a way Lenny cannot forgive his father for not being able to secure him a much better education. On his visit to his parents, Lenny says: “The instructions, the Confucian-like code of Russian father-son relations, spooled in my mind: Father means I have to love him, have to listen to him, can’t offend him, can’t hurt him, can’t bring him to task for past wrongs; an old man now, defenseless, deserving all I can offer” (*Super* 130).

*Super Sad True Love Story* is a dystopian novel that takes readers into the New York of the future where media and retail reign. In this fictional world created by Shteyngart, people have an ‘äppärät’ that contains all the data about their life, personality and more importantly their financial situation. They are measured according to their buying and spending power. Lenny Abramov works at the Post-Human Services division of the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation, where his work is to sell immortality to those who can afford it. But most of the ‘High Net Individuals’ turn out to be ‘Impossible to Preserve.’

On his last day in Europe, after a one-year business trip which proves to be a disaster, Lenny Abramov begins writing a diary and decides that he has to live forever: “…Lenny Abramov, your humble diarist, your small nonentity, will live forever. The technology is almost here. As the Life Lovers Outreach Coordinator (Grade G) of the Post-Human Services division of the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation, I will be the first to partake of it” (*Super* 3). He has to believe in himself in order to achieve his goal. Lenny is already 39 years old which in this new world means that he is old.

Lenny falls in love with the Korean-American Eunice Park, an Asian version of Audrey Hepburn, who is very young. He thinks that if he is loved by this young girl he will be saved. Lenny struggles to learn the language used by Eunice in her conversation with her friends. The fictional GlobalTeens account with its abbreviations and special language appears as the updated version of our Twitter and Facebook social networks. Through the writings of this account we find out about Eunice’s feelings for Lenny, for her family and her philosophy about life. She tries to free herself from the constraints of the traditional Korean family.

Eunice cannot understand Lenny’s ardent feelings for reading. In a world which is dominated by superficial things she is not able to deal with Lenny’s passion for reading:

Anyway, what kind of freaked me out was that I saw Len reading a book…He had this ruler out and he was moving it down the page very slowly and just like whispering little things to himself, like trying to understand every little part of it. I was going to teen my sister but I was so embarrassed I just stood there and watched him read which lasted for like HALF AN HOUR[[3]](#footnote-4), and finally he put the book down and I pretended like nothing happened. (*Super* 142)

In this new world created by Shteyngart people and especially youngsters do not read. They only scan the texts but not penetrate beyond the surface. Eunice thinks that books are smelly, useless things. Unlike Lenny, she does not find comfort and happiness in reading. In Eunice’s superficial world the boundary between happiness and sadness is blurred: “You know what’s the worst is when you’re happy and sad at the same time and you can’t figure out which is which” (*Super* 170). She is young and beautiful but still cannot find her happiness.

Shteyngart’s hero is of Jewish origin but he is not a traditional, religious Jew. Lenny Abramov does not believe in religion. Lenny and Eunice have to take part in the ‘Sinners’ Crusade’ together with the Park family but he is not moved by the Christian sermon. He says:

We Jews, we thought all this stuff up, we invented this Big Lie from which all Christianity, all Western civilization, has sprung, because we too were ashamed. So much shame…The endless martyrdom…Do not believe the Judeo-Christian lie! Accept your thoughts! Accept your desires! Accept the truth! And if there is more than one truth, then learn to do the difficult work – learn to choose. You are good enough, you are *human enough,* to choose![[4]](#footnote-5) (*Super* 188)

In Lenny’s point of view the individual has to accept that he is alone in the universe: “Sorry that we were all alone in the universe where even our fathers would let us get nailed to a tree if they were so inclined, or cut our throats if so commanded – see under Isaac, another unfortunate Jewish shmuck” (*Super* 185). He thinks that there have been too many killings in the name of the different religions. Human beings have been slaughtered. Lenny says: “My mind was full of sickening Jewish worry, the pogrom within and the pogrom without” (*Super* 162). The centuries-long persecution of the Jewish population has imprinted its mark on his mind.

In this world of Gary Shteyngart, the Jews play an important role. Rubinstein, a high ranking official of the new system, leads this world. Lenny’s office is in a former synagogue that still smells of kosher food. Though they no longer pray there in the traditional sense of the word, they “pray” to the god of financial resources through their work. They try to sell immortality to wealthy clients who can afford it. Lenny’s boss, Joshie, is like a science fiction god. He undergoes several treatments to look younger. Joshie invites Lenny and Eunice to his house for a glass of wine where Lenny introduces himself to Joshie because he does not recognize him: “his body reverse-engineered into a thick young mass of tendons and forward motion” (*Super* 215). Joshie wants to meet Eunice to learn the language of the youngster though he is not aware that: “Youth. A seemingly untrammeled flow of energy. Beauty without nanotechnology. If only he knew how unhappy she was” (*Super* 215). Joshie thinks that youth and happiness go hand in hand. He wants to behave like the youngsters, and so he learns the abbreviations used among them.

Joshie is also aware of the fact that he can remain young only if he uses his brain all the time: “Creative thinking, working with your mind, that’s my number-one prescription for longevity. If you stop thinking, if you stop wondering, you die. That simple” (*Super* 217). He wants to remain young and live forever. For Joshie love is not important and, unlike Lenny, he cannot find comfort in it. He does not believe in the power of feelings but at the same time he falls in love with Eunice. He invents all kinds of stories only to be able to send her a message. He even arranges for a painting course with a Parisian teacher to be alone with Eunice.

As in his second novel, Shteyngart here too creates a world that is under siege. In this novel, politicians together with business people build a new world order. The most important thing is to be rich enough to survive. In this new order the leaders will be the well-to-do ones. Rubinstein, the Jewish leader, is only a puppet in the hand of the business people. They see conflicts as a good way to make a lot of money. They do not care for the human beings who are killed or for those American soldiers who die because of them. Their only interest is to make more and more money. Uprisings and conflicts can generate money and can make the IMF invest and help them out. Lenny’s friend Noah is killed, and Lenny cannot understand the reason behind his useless death. On their return to Manhattan, Noah and his girlfriend embark on a different ship which is blown up. Lenny feels that Noah’s death is caused by him because he tells Nettie Fine, his American stepmother, that he is not on the same ferry as Noah. The first Noah was chosen by God to save a remnant of life because of his righteousness. This modern Noah is killed for no specific reason, thus making his death even more absurd.

Lenny cannot get over this traumatic experience and keeps dreaming about Noah: “Politics on our tongues, girls on our minds, just two guys from the suburbs, freshmen at NYU, Noah’s already working on one of the last novels that will ever see print, I’m working on being the friend of someone like Noah. Are these memories even real? This is my life now. Dreams, nothing but dream” (*Super* 248). Lenny tries to forget about the environment in which he has to live and attempts to find comfort in his feelings for Eunice. In his attempt to seek forgiveness he visits his parents and tries to forgive them for being only immigrants. They were not able to secure him the life of a wealthy American that Lenny wished to have. Lenny knows that his parents are able to survive because “being hard-boiled working-class immigrants, designed by an angry God for a calamity of precisely this magnitude” (*Super* 282) is a quality that makes them fit for survival.

Lenny appears as a weak character who does not take any action even when he is personally attacked. He feels that he is unable to help: “I could not help them. Could not help my parents. Could not help Eunice. Could not help myself” (*Super* 308). He cannot change the course of events. Lenny does not change till the end of the novel but what in his eyes are seen as weakness appear as his strengths in the eyes of Eunice:

Because he has a different kind of strength than Joshie. He has the strength of his sweet tuna arms. He has the strength of putting his nose in my hair and calling it home. He has the strength to cry when I go down on him. Who IS Lenny? Who DOES that? Who will ever open up to me like that again? No one. Because it’s too dangerous. Lenny is a dangerous man. Joshie is more powerful, but Lenny is much more dangerous.[[5]](#footnote-6) (*Super* 296)

When Lenny and Eunice have to move out of their flat, he expresses his disappointment regarding reading: “I felt the weakness of these books, their immateriality, how they had failed to change the world, and I didn’t want to sully myself with their weakness anymore. I wanted to invest my energies in something more fruitful and conducive to a life that mattered” (*Super* 309-310). But he takes the books with them and only the books. Even Eunice does not want to take anything else from their flat.

In my opinion, through the character of Lenny Shteyngart expresses his disappointment regarding the reading habits of the young generation. By contrast, he still believes in the power of books. Shteyngart’s world is a bleak one without hope for a better future but the act of taking the books and only the books with them shows that there is still hope for a better future. The new technologies used by Joshie and the youngsters do not prove to be useful in the long run. Joshie wants to replace his heart because he thinks that it is a “Useless muscle. Idiotically designed…we’re going to teach the blood *exactly[[6]](#footnote-7)* where to go and how fast to go and then we’ll just let it do all the circulating. Call me heartless” (*Super* 293). But in the end he has to face the cruel truth that he has to die and cannot beat nature: “Our genocidal war on free radicals proved more damaging than helpful, hurting cellular metabolism, robbing the body of control. In the end, nature simply would not yield” (*Super* 327). Nature has its own ways and we cannot change it even though we want to believe that as human beings we are in control.

Until the end of the novel, Eunice loves Lenny: “I still love him. He’s just so clueless. My poor Leonardo Dabramovinci” (*Super* 299). It is strange to call him a name that brings to mind Leonardo da Vinci. He was a Renaissance polymath: a sculptor, painter, engineer, architect, musician, and mathematician. He was praised for his curiosity and inventiveness. Lenny is nothing of that sort as we were able to see. He tries to find comfort in the fictional world of books and stops asking questions. They have one thing in common: that they love Italy. Lenny moves back to Italy after his love relationship with Eunice ends, “I cashed in my remaining Staatling preferred stock, gathered all the yuan I had, and moved to a small farmhouse in the Valdarno Valley of the Tuscan Free State” (*Super* 326). Lenny moves there because this is the place where he can escape the insane world of data, of financial analysis and extreme appraisal of youth. He says: “I wanted to be in a place with less data, less youth, and where old people like myself were not despised simply for being old, where an old man, for example, could be considered beautiful” (*Super* 326).

From the beginning of the novel Lenny appears as an individual of Jewish origins. He does not reject his Jewish identity. He is not a religious Jew and as I have said in the earlier part of this paper, as a Russian Jew his identity is not a chosen one but is biologically determined. He does not want to change his identity throughout the novel but wants to find a meaning in his life. Lenny is saved because he is of Jewish origins. Supposedly it is a brotherhood of powerful Jews who run the world and help their fellow brothers.

Lenny’s final diary entry shows a man who finally understood that life has an end. Even if we have state-of-the-art technologies, we cannot change the course of the events set by nature. He says: “Today, I’ve made a major decision: *I am going to die*”[[7]](#footnote-8) (*Super* 303). He understands that in a world driven by material success human feelings disappear. Allegedly Shteyngart criticizes our world that is not able to satisfy the needs of the individual with its many products, its wealth and its false ideas that we can live forever with the help of different technologies. In the end Lenny changes his name from Lenny Abramov into Larry Abraham, “which seemed to me very North American, a touch of leisure suit, a touch of Old Testament” (*Super* 326). I think with this act he signs a new covenant with god. He will become finally an American of Jewish origin, and forget about his Russianness. He will be able to forget about his origins and live the life he has always wanted.

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