

**Displacement, Identity, and Human Capabilities: Martha Nussbaum's
Development Ethics and Joyce Carol Oates's *The Gravedigger's Daughter***

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Joyce Carol Oates's oeuvre departs significantly from that of other contemporary American novelists in sharply focusing on poverty in the United States. Noted for its prolificity and protean nature, Oates's fiction nevertheless retains humanism as a core value, and in that her critique of social evils like class difference is noteworthy. Unlike working-class fiction that mostly originates from authors with a working-class background and focuses primarily on issues of upward mobility and agency, Oates is an American author who despite her humble origins (born in Lockport, New York in 1938 to a dye designer) went on to become a mainstream writer and educationist (she is Roger S. Berlind '52 Professor in the Humanities with the Program in Creative Writing at Princeton University since 1978) and her fiction contains social commentaries and critiques of America. Her engagement with the underprivileged masses in society does not entail the writing of protest literature. Instead, she focuses on the poor to examine their basic lack of universal human rights, and often celebrates their human potentials as they emerge strengthened from the vagaries of life. Dedicated to Oates's grandmother Blanche Morgenstern, her recent novel *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007) narrates the tale of Rebecca Schwart's journey, a woman who turns pedestrianly shrewd rather than remaining superhumanly afflicted, in transcending abject poverty and violation. Powerfully highlighting the issues of destitution, cultural displacement, and loss of identity, Rebecca *aka* Hazel Jones's narrative is one of sheer endurance to finally reach a state of dignified selfhood.

Joyce Carol Oates's novels including *them* (1969), *Because It Is Bitter, And Because It Is My Heart* (1990), and *The Rise of Life on Earth* (1991) are convincing depictions of the underprivileged masses in society. *them*, a National Book Award winner, is the story of Loretta Wendall, her daughter Maureen, and her son Jules set through a complex field of time and space in Detroit and its environs between 1937 and 1967. The novel is a commentary on the difficulties faced by the American working-class and depiction of lower class tragedy through its descriptions of urban life and the interweaving of colloquial language with prose. *Because It Is Bitter, And Because It Is My Heart* highlights once again problem of inhuman conditions of life through the poverty stricken world of the black Fairchilds in a small city in upstate New York, in the decade before the upsurge of the civil rights movement, when racial prejudice seemed inflexible and habitual. Likewise, *The Rise of Life on Earth* set in the underside of working-class Detroit of the '60s and '70s, is the tale of Kathleen Hennessy, a nurse's aide who, as both martyr and avenging angel is an archetype of the of the "insulted and injured" of American society. Over-worked, underpaid, and quietly overzealous, Kathleen falls in love with a young doctor, whose exploitation of her sets the course of the remainder of her life, in which her passivity masks a deep fury and secret resolve to take revenge, of which she finally emerges with a renewed selfhood.

Espousing the core values of humanism, the social critique in Oates's novels is strikingly similar to developmental theories propounded by Martha Nussbaum such as the "capability approach" in works like *The Quality of Life* (1993) co-edited with Amartya Sen, *Sex and Social Justice* (1999), and *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (2000). This approach assesses human development not through crude measures such as GDP, or other economic indicators, but by measuring the individual's growth vis-à-vis the quality of life.

Human capabilities can, therefore, be seen an appropriate tool in the analysis of literary texts such as Oates's that often deal with economic and cultural deprivations. They provide a philosophical underpinning for the basic human rights which according to Nussbaum "should be respected and implemented by the governments of all nations, as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires" (*Women and Human Development* 5). Specifically, the focus on the problem of women that was earlier neglected in development economics and in the international human rights movement, being derived primarily from standard GNP and utility based approaches is tackled by the capabilities approach, leading to a political proposal that is a "partial theory of justice" (*Women and Human Development* 6). Besides, Nussbaum claims that economic growth "does not by itself improve the situation with regard to literacy and health care: so there are issues affecting all citizens that are left in a state of relative neglect when growth becomes the sole target" (*Women and Human Development* 33). In Oates's fiction too, material success is not the prime indicator of happiness and well-being as she often highlights the lack of human dignity in seemingly prosperous men and women, fashioned and simultaneously suppressed by consumerist cultures. Read in juxtaposition, the authorial voice of Oates and the developmental ethics of Nussbaum both make a distinctive plea for "the practical pursuit of gender [and social] justice" (*Women and Human Development* 303).

In *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007), Joyce Carol Oates forcefully articulates the issues of ethnic displacement, economic deprivation, and crisis of identity that characterized the status of immigrant Jews in post-World War II America. The deplorable condition of human life in Oates's novel is akin to the severe tragedy that Martha Nussbaum characterizes as the complete absence of human "capabilities." The sympathetic portrayal of the issues of poverty, displacement, and crisis of identity in the novel also parallel young Marx's readings of

Artitotleian humanism in analysing the problematic of class inequalities. Marx felt that the lives of the poor workers was not worthy of humanity because they could eat and drink in a way that was not human, and they had neither leisure nor the time to socialize. His view was that all activities in order to be worthy of humanity had to be infused with practical reason and sociability. Similarly, Oates's portrayal of poor immigrants, namely, the Schwart family in *The Gravedigger's Daughter* presents deplorable and inhuman living conditions of the Schwarts as they settle down in New York, fleeing from Nazi prosecution in Germany in the year 1936.

Before we go into an analysis of the predicaments of the Schwart family in Oates's novel, it would be profitable here to discuss the liberal socialist analysis of poverty in America. To all and many people, poverty means merely the absence of money. This is a definition influenced, perhaps, by the American belief that if money is lacking, work and determination will provide it, and that in the affluent American society no one need starve. But it must also be remembered that poverty is not merely a question of food, or of money, or of determination. For poverty deprives the individual not only of material comfort but also of human dignity and fulfillment. Its causes are much more complex, and its cure requires more than merely a relief check or the creation of one or two programs of training and retaining. It must be realized that, because of growing complexity of modern society, the disadvantaged in particular, more and more lose the very ability to make choices, to be responsible, to know what must be done, and to take action. In short, poverty in America like in most parts of the world is a complex interlocking of a set of circumstances caused by and in turn reinforcing each other, that combine to keep the individual without money, without help, without work.

Poverty, according to contemporary welfarists, is an inclusive phenomenon which means not only the lack of money but also the absence of human dignity. Taking his cue from *The*

Nicomachean Ethics and Aristotle's 'political distribution' which recognizes the crucial importance of a person's functioning and capabilities, the complex problematic of poverty as described by Amartya Sen in the essay "Capability and Well-Being" refers to a state in which an individual is shorn of all "capabilities". Sen begins with the "primitive notion" of "functionings" which represent parts of the state of a person, "in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life" (*The Quality of Life* 31). "Capability" of a person, on the other hand, reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. Consequently, well-being or the absence of poverty is assessed by agency success or the presence of human capabilities "that come from the nature of his own life", rather than evaluating a person's standard of living which has "otherregarding" objectives or impersonal concerns" (*The Quality of Life* 37).

Joyce Carol Oates's fiction, in a similar fashion, espouses welfare as the freedom of human agency and therefore the wide relevance of the capability perspective in her work does not come as a surprise. Discussing her intimate understanding of the life of the impoverished masses, Harold Bloom tellingly observes, "She is not a political novelist, not a social revolutionary in any merely overt way, and yet she is our true proletarian novelist. Her outcast protagonists ... are the authentic children of the Great Depression, as I suppose Oates herself has been" (*Modern Critical Views: Joyce Carol Oates*. 1987). In defending the cause of the underdogs, Oates's political sensibility is also reminiscent of the left-liberal New York intellectuals and the Frankfurt School thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse and Truman Garcia Capote.

Oates's recent novel, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, which deals with issues of anti-semitism, poverty, and domestic violence among others, is also an oblique comment on the

hypocrisy inherent in America's political altruism. In accommodating the refugees fleeing from the Third Reich, America was partly motivated by the compelling need to obtain cheap labour for its growing market economy. Therefore, the twentieth century's wave of immigration followed by the Holocaust that destroyed most of the European Jewish community, made the United States the home of the largest Jewish population in the world during the 20th century. Even though it provided respite from religious prosecution, the Jews coming to America as poor immigrants nevertheless suffered ghetto poverty, illness, sweat shops and exploitation. Besides, the United States also enforced the restrictive Immigration Law of 1924 which slammed the door shut on Jewish entry into America, a restriction that remained in effect throughout the entire Holocaust. If America had retained an open immigration policy during those horrific years, it is conceivable that as many as two million Jews might have been saved from the gas chambers. The complexity of the American immigration policy is exposed in Oates's novel through the Schwart family which becomes an archetype of the hapless immigrants who exchange their political unfreedom for an economic one in the land of plenty, and thereby condemn themselves to an inhuman life shorn of all capabilities.

Capturing the misery of living in immigrant slums, of the exploitation of the Jewish workers, and the desperation of the Jewish masses, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* is the narrative of Rebecca, the daughter of Jacob and Anna Schwart, German-Jewish refugees in the United States. In 1936, they flee to America with their two young sons, Herschel and August; Rebecca is born in New York Harbor even as the family is still on the boat. Like the Biblical Jacob from whom the patriarch of the Schwart household derives his name, Jacob Schwart is presented to be a studious and reserved personality in his earlier life. A former mathematics teacher, soccer coach and printer's assistant, Jacob can find work only as a gravedigger and cemetery caretaker

in the Chautauqua town in upstate New York where the Schwarts settle down. Jacob, the philosopher and socialist who loved reading “Schopenhauer” and “Karl Marx” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 85) and was passionately adored by his young wife Anna, is reduced to a poor gravedigger in the United States. Like an “eyeless undersea creature” he slowly gets surrounded by “deadness” in his professional as well as personal life (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 86). Haunted by Nazi demons and with his ego battered by prejudice and humiliation in the new life, Jacob torments his terrified wife and children and finally kills himself.

As the Schwart family struggles to survive “in the gravedigger’s hovel” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 82), they are plagued by mental as well as physical illness. The lack of selfhood and extreme poverty slowly reduces Anna into a “delirious, muttering and raving” creature with “demon eyes” mouthing the “coarsest German profanities” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 162). In her madness she reminds Jacob of a “dybbuk”, a malicious possessing spirit, believed to be the dislocated soul of a dead person in European Jewish folklore, and he begins to detest her. In a similar fashion, Herschel and August suffer not only the shame of being discriminated as Jews in school, but also feel embarrassed for being labeled as the “gravedigger’s sons” and worse the “son’s of the gravedigger’s wife” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 80). Unable to survive social prejudice and religious discrimination, Herschel turns into a criminal and abandons his family while August simply vanishes from home without any intimation. Stripped off all dignity and feeling emasculated without his sons, Jacob is left alone in the “hellhole of the twentieth century” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 158) with his deranged with and little daughter. Social hostility drives him to pessimism and depression as the vicious circle of impoverishment robs him of his capability to think, have positive emotions and practical reason. As his bodily and mental health deteriorates Jacob begins to hallucinate of “swastika”

marks all around him. Eventually, the perception of worthlessness which he feels from his Christian “enemies” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 156) gets incorporated within Jacob himself and in a moment of complete hysteria Jacob re-enacts the “pogrom” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 184), murdering his wife and shooting himself before the eyes of his young daughter.

Jacob dies leaving young Rebecca with his last words: “you were born here. They will not hurt you” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 186) after which she begins her arduous journey into America. Living as a ward of the Chautauqua County till the age of eighteen, Rebecca finally moves out into the world hopeful of a new beginning. While working as an assistant in a hotel named General Washington, she meets and falls in love with Niles Tignor, “a brewery representative, or agent” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 223). She gets into a hurried marriage with the mysterious Tignor believing that “[t]here was no man [she] had loved in all her life, and she loved Niles Tignor” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 225). Unfortunately she realizes that she is trapped in an abusive relationship with her husband, only when she is pregnant with his child. Not only does Tignor make her emotionally and financially dependant on him, he also assaults her physically and deprives her of her bodily integrity by prohibiting her to intermingle with others or move freely. Himself a philanderer, Tignor bars Rebecca from meeting outsiders fearing infidelity. Significantly, the moments in which Tignor’s anti-semitism comes out against his wife are the ones which expose his fake thoughtfulness and genuine lust for her. Her family becomes what Nussbaum describes as the site of “neglect, abuse, and degradation” (*Women and Human Development* 243). The universality of women’s experience of violence is palpable in the fictional narrative of Rebecca like the real predicaments of Vasanti in Nussbaum’s *Women and Human Development*. Both suffer “domestic violence, marital rape, . . . unequal health care, unequal educational opportunities, and countless more intangible violations of dignity” and for

both “home a place of drunken physical abuse” (*Women and Human Development* 243). Despite the trappings of an abusive relationship, Rebecca nevertheless sticks through her marriage for the fear of being “broken and scattered like dried leaves blown by the wind” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 278). Once again the ubiquitous nature of women’s exploitation is explicit in Nussbaum’s statement on Indian women who, like young Rebecca, are “simply unable to form the concept of their own well-being as distinct from the well-being of family members” (*Women and Human Development* 56).

Finally, with the birth of their son, Niley, Rebecca decides to start working in order to survive through the absence of Tignor and his money. At this point the predicament of Rebecca is particularly poignant as she is saddled with the ‘double day’ of taxing employment and also household chores and child care, thereby lacking all opportunities for relaxation or the cultivation of imaginative and cognitive faculties. At the Niagara Fiber Tubing she works five days a week under very difficult and dangerous conditions, she has few rights, long work hours and a marginal pay. Rebecca’s journey from girlhood to womanhood exemplifies the notion that “in most parts of the world women do not have the same opportunities as men” (*The Quality of Life* 5). Despite being a spelling champion at school, “a winner of the Milburn School Township Spelling Bee” contest (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 120), the young Rebecca was denied education by her eccentric father, and in a similar fashion, her husband confines her to the house and a menial job, denying her the right to explore her potentials or earn more money even through his long stretches of absence.

As Tignor ages and proves to be professional failure, he tries to re-establish his fumbling masculinity by intensifying his aggression on Rebecca and Niley. He abuses Rebecca both physically and sexually, proving the axiom that “rape within marriage[s] . . . is not a rare

phenomenon, but ‘frequent enough to constitute a significant social problem’ (*Sex and Social Justice* 143). In a climactic moment, he accuses Rebecca of infidelity and tries to kill the “Jew! Bitch! Whore!” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 329), and the “[d]amn cry-baby” (*The Gravedigger’s Daughter* 330). Hereafter, Rebecca becomes resolute to leave Tignor and flees with Niley. Through a portentous coincidence, she changes her name to Hazel Jones. Borrowing a name from the Bible, she makes her son Zacharias, meets her new lover, Chet Gallagher, the disaffected scion of a wealthy family; and finally succeeds in carving out a niche for herself in the end by regaining her essential human capabilities.

Simply stated, Oates’s *The Gravedigger’s Daughter* delineates Rebecca’s journey from childhood to womanhood, from extreme penury to considerable prosperity. The most arresting feature of this narrative, however, lies in its graphic descriptions of socio-economic impoverishment which leads to an incapacitation in men and women, not just materially but also in the way in which they employ their consciousness. The novel begins with the depictions of the Schwart family enduring abuse, unequal wages, and even malnutrition in trying to survive through the turbulent post-war decades in America. Geographically displaced and economically disempowered, the Schwarts suffer loss of all central functional capabilities, leaving them no control over their environment, be it political or material. In focusing on Rebecca’s predicaments, Oates reveals how the poor and more so the poor woman is denied opportunities to achieve even a modicum of human dignity and critiques a social system that undermines the biological and intellectual subjectivity of the marginalized.

An analysis of the concepts of displacement, identity, poverty, and gender inequality in *The Gravedigger’s Daughter* obtain depth and resonance when read in tandem with Nussbaum’s development ethics and the capability approach. Economic impoverishment and the lack of

support for central human functions call for immediate revision in the field gender equality and human development. Such welcome changes come about not only through identifying the limitations of economic and utilitarian approaches, but more positively by the timely negotiation of culturally nuanced concepts of human capabilities articulated by thinkers like Nussbaum and Oates.

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