

## PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL FAMILY VIOLENCE IN HENRY ROTH'S CALL IT SLEEP

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**Abstract:** The research discusses the images of physical and emotional family violence in *Call It Sleep*, a stream-of-consciousness and a loosely autobiographical novel written by the Jewish American novelist, Henry Roth in 1934. Published in the economically and politically depressing years of the 1930s, Roth's *Call It Sleep* remains out of print and is neglected by critics until its resurrection in the 1960s. Reissued in the 1960s, *Call It Sleep* is highly praised as the most significant and truthful document of the Jewish American experience ever written. Set in a fallen world in a time the Americans fear an economic catastrophe and the Europeans fear the domination of fascism and the outbreak of a second world war, *Call It Sleep* is viewed as a realistic and grim depiction of the terrors and the burdens the Jews, represented by the Yiddish-speaking family, the Schearls, feel as they migrate to America and live in the filthy slum tenements of New York society. The research unfolds the reasons behind the bitterness of the father figure, Albert Schearl and his resentful and violent treatment, physical or Schearl. It makes clear that Albert's violence is attributed to many political, economic, social, and psychological issues\_ class struggle, multiculturalism, language plurality, and oedipal feelings. It also sheds light on the novelist's autobiography and shows what relevance it, in addition to the title of his novel, has to the theme of family violence.

**Keywords:** Albert, American, Call, Roth, Sleep, Violence

**Introduction: Physical and Emotional Family Violence in Henry Roth's Call It Sleep:** Roth's novel, *Call It Sleep* opens with a prologue describing the arrival of David Schearl, an Austrian Jewish child in the arms of his immigrant mother in 1907 to the shore of the United States where they are greeted by the Polish Jewish immigrant father, Albert Schearl who has already been in New York, working as a printer to pay for their passage. In 1907, it is stated that many European Jewish immigrants migrate to the United States of America or what Genya, Albert's wife, has described as the Ellis or the Golden land to escape either anti-Semitism or some economic hardships. For many immigrants, America is a land full of promises and where they can feel secure, rise financially and lead a better life, and be united with people of diverse ethnicities, religions, and cultures\_ the illusion that Henry Roth plays on in writing his novel and is revealed to the readers through the family's meeting. Not recognized in the crowded immigrant hall by his wife for having shaved his moustache and looking exhausted and slim, Albert quickly gets enraged. Ironically, the moment husband and wife get united in the Golden land, they " stood silent, apart ; the man staring aloof, offended eyes grimly down at the water\_ or if he turned his face towards his wife at all, it was only to glare in harsh contempt at the blue straw hat worn by the child in her arms, and then his hostile eyes would sweep about the deck to see if anyone else were observing him. And his wife beside him uneasily, appealing. And the child against her breast looking for one to the other with watchful, frightened eyes ... The woman, as if driven by the strain, into action, tried to

smile, and touching her husband's arm said timidly, "And this is the Golden land"(CIS, Prologue, p. 11)[1] The above passage tells readers something about the cold relationship between husband and wife in the past before getting united in America. The question is why their relationship is very cold. To answer this question is to delve deep into Genya's past life before getting married to Albert. Albert is contemptuous and resentful of his wife for she has made a passionate affair with a Gentile. Outlawed by her father for her past infatuation with the Gentile, Genya has no choice other than marrying Albert. Albert's resentment and hatred is also directed to the two years old David whom, Albert suspects, is not his son. Not loved, deserted, and brutally and coldly treaded by her husband, Geyna directs all her attention to her son, David. Put like this, the father, as Alfred Kazin remarks, "is an extraneous because he has lost for the mother [ Genya] the sexual charm that first attracted her"[2 ]Suspicious that David is not his son, Albert asks Genya about David's age and his birth certificate. His negative feeling are again addressed to readers in the prologue when he, full of agitation, using his long fingers to scoop the hat from David's head, throws it, bringing by that David's tears. Because of his animosity towards the child, Albert even makes use of the pronoun it when referring to his crying child and the word 'howling' to describe David's cries he wishes not to hear. From this meeting, David senses that his father does not love him. Albert's aggression to David is addressed to readers verbally: "The harsh voice, the wrathful glare, the hand flung toward the child frightened him. Without knowing the cause, he knew that the

Stanger's anger was directed at himself. He burst into tears and pressed closer to his mother." (CIS, Prologue, p. 15) In fact, the prologue gives readers a clear portrait of the emotional life David is going to lead with his parents. Rather than sentimentalizing the relationship between father and son, Roth, making use of Genya's defamatory past, and consequently Albert's paranoia and suspicions about David, draws an Oedipal relationship responsible for the destruction of the family. The prologue is very important to read for it, using Hana Wirth- Neshet's words, "establishes the emotional pattern that is to dominate the child's life." [3] Freudian in its pattern, the relationship between David's parents is not the only cause behind Albert's violence and anger towards his wife and son. Albert's daily war on his family is also attributed to economic troubles. Albert, as the prologue shows, seems to have led an uneasy, and impoverished life in the Lower East Side of New York. Astonished to see her husband lean and haggard, Genya guesses that Albert must have suffered in the Golden land. Why shall he suffer? Isn't he in the fairy land where all immigrants' expectations and dreams must have come true? To reverse the idea that America is a dream land that assimilates European immigrants, Roth, through the Schearls' experience, shows how life is economically difficult and is culturally impossible in the neighborhoods of New York society. Before explaining Albert's disillusionment concerning this land and answering the question why he does suffer, readers must have a historical picture of the grim urban landscape of the Lower East Side and Brownsville \_ two industrial areas congested with a large population of slum immigrant workers. In his book, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Black, Jews and the Changing Face of the Ghetto*, Pritchett Wendell writes: In the period fifty years \_ from its founding in the late 1880s to the beginning of World War II \_ Brownsville changed from a community of small farms to a dense neighborhood of tenements holding the large concentration of Jews in the United States. Destined as a working-class area from its inception because of poor geography, Brownsville was marked by lack of planning, shoddy building, poor city services, and weak provision for parks and recreation....and these men developed a neighborhood where people struggled to maintain minimum standards of health and sanitation. [4] These immigrant working-class neighborhoods tend to be more heterogeneous, as Ruth Wissie points out, than "homogenous Jewish community." [5] Again, the myth of America as "a melting-pot" [6] world that can unite different ethnic groups is contradicted. All the members of the Schearls fail to adjust to the society's demands. They even face troubles, except the father, in communicating with English speaking Americans

outside home and feel lost and disorient in America for having not mastered the streets in the neighborhood. The father too suffers from alienation and poverty. Having the status of an immigrant and working-class worker, the bad tempered Albert fails to be assimilated by the highly economic world of New York society. He loses one job after another and complains that he has wasted much time for a meager pay. He usually laments that he sells "his days for a little silver \_ a little paper\_ sixteen smirched leaves a week\_ I will never buy them back with gold." (CIS, *The Rail*, p. 266) Because of immigration, he feels that he is uprooted. For him, immigration is a form of banishment. Rather than being the land where he can socially rise, America becomes the cursed land which increases his frustration. He gets more disillusioned with the American dream as he starts losing his hair and getting older. To get older is to have less opportunities in America and fail to achieve success. This realization makes him more brutal and violent with his family. This low life, in addition to his wife's Oedipal feelings towards her son, makes Albert so intense with David and consequently strains the relationship between father and son. David often fears his father's presence which is symbolically shown by his fear of "red day," (CIS, *The Cellar*, p. 19) or Sundays and "the evil hour," (Ibid.) of his coming home. Unlike other street boys, he does not know where his father works, nor does he know why his father does not stick to one job. These are the questions he usually asks himself and does not find answers to. Albert's paranoia even makes him imagine things: "They look at me crookedly, with mockery in their eyes !How much can a man endure? May the fire of God consume them!" (CIS, *The Cellar*, p. 22) Put like this, *Call It Sleep* is, as read by Hana Wirth- Neshet, " a searing record of the price of disinheritance paid by immigrants." [7] Like the characters of his novel, Henry Roth is a Jewish immigrant and has paid the price for being so. He was born in 1906 in Galitzia ( now Ukraine). When he was eighteen months old, Roth was taken by his mother to New York city to be united with his father who had gone to America to prepare for the family's arrival. As the Schearls, the Roths keep moving from one place to another. They live for a short time in Brownsville before moving to the self-sustained Jewish Lower East Side neighborhood of New York. There, Roth's parents faced many economic troubles and their life seemed so hard till they moved to Harlem in 1914. The great price he had paid, as a Jewish immigrant writer, was a prolonged period of silence. It was not until 1994 that he published another novel. He endured the longest period of a writer's block for his inability to realize himself. For a time in his life, he suffered from a self-fragmented identity that hindered any literary

attempt at writing. The price he pays is that the author in him becomes dead for a very long period of time. Spending his childhood life with his mother, when his father figure absent, at home, Roth " was favored by his mother but sensed his father's disapproval." [8] Roth the writer dies because of an inner collision between "ideals of pride in his immigrant history and a drive toward assimilation." [9] Roth's life in the Jewish Lower East Side slums during childhood makes him identify himself with the Jewish people. But he, at the time of drafting *Call It Sleep*, Myles Weber remarks, seems to be " an agnostic assimilationist with strongly anti-Semitic tendencies." [10] Thus, Roth's novel is written at times when he is completely lost. Like the protagonist of his novel, David, Roth suffers from an inner conflict\_ either to retain his Jewish identity and the use of the Yiddish language in an English-speaking New York society or not. Roth's identity crisis is clear in his following speech: "That point [moving from Lower East Side to Harlem] marked the beginning of the end of my sense of belonging, and with it my sense of identity. After that, except at home, all speaking, and of course all writing was in English, and it became almost inevitable that *Call It Sleep*, based on lost identity, would be all the novel I could genuinely write... In fact, the apocalyptic end of the novel may very well depict what the author unconsciously felt: in the novel the child lives on, but his identity seems to have no future." [11] The Schearls do not have the sense of belonging to America. The failure to belong is attributed to the multi-cultural and multi-lingual world they find themselves in. As mentioned before, Genya, having not learned English, the language of mainstream American culture, fails to pronounce the word, Boddeh Street \_ the word that Albert impatiently corrects in front of his wife "scores of time." (CIS, The Cellar, p.33) Unlike Genya, Albert uses English. Though he does not fail to access to English and he uses it correctly, he often utters English words violently. He uses it whenever he is in conflict. This association between Albert's violence and English is due to his feelings of being "an other." [12] To use others' language is to lose his identity\_ a matter that makes him unconsciously violent. Violence becomes associated with English again when the stern Rabbi, to whom David, against his will, is sent to learn what a Jew means and how to redeem himself , resents violently young students for speaking English \_ the language which is often associated "with Gentile culture." [12] It is noteworthy to point to the rejection of Genya's parents of the Gentile culture represented by Ludwing, a Gentile organist with whom Genya, before marrying Albert and moving with him to the United States of America, has made a shameful affair, bringing by that dishonor to her family. Having heard

a conversation in Polish between his mother and his aunt , David, because of his sense of disorientation and otherness and suffering psychologically from the mental process of free association, has invented a story\_ that he is the son of a Gentile and his mother is dead \_ which makes his father so violent and abusive towards him. For fear that her past story be understood by the members of her family, Genya has used intentionally Polish, the common language that she and her sister share in their past Polish-speaking community and which is not accessible to her son, David. Thus, Polish, rather than being the language that unites people, is used to include or exclude people. For Genya, it becomes the "screen by which she can keep David from understanding what she is talking about," [12] and is consequently an "exclusive rather than inclusive language" [12] for him. In addition to being so, it is also regarded as "a feminine language" [12] for being used by the sisters only and there is no reference in the novel that it is used , though he comes perhaps from Poland, by Albert who, due to this very reason, seems also an 'other' to Genya and Ludwing because of whom Albert is outrageous and fiercely violent to his wife throughout the novel. Albert's continuous doubts eat him from inside. He feels that Genya has never turned him love. He thinks that his attempt to lead a prosperous and respectable life in America is futile. His life in America is endangered by his wife's shameful past. He resentfully tells her : "I am in America sweating for your passport, starving myself. You see? Thousands of miles away. Alone. Never writing to anyone only to you. Now! He's mine born a month or two too soon to mine \_ perhaps more. Why then exactly on the head of the hour you write me\_ I have a son! A joy! Fortune! I have a son. Ha !But when you come across, the doctors were too knowing. Fool your husband, they said. I haven't forgotten. My memory's good. An organist, eh? A goy, God help you! Ah! It's clear! But My blood! My blood! My blood I say warned me!" (CIS, The Rail, p. 392). Albert's rejection and unrelenting criticism of his wife is also clear when he blames her saying that she still is living the past which is represented by a painting of the landscape of a field of corn and blue flowers. This painting exasperates Albert since it reminds his wife of her homeland and relates her to the field where she has seen her lover, Ludwing for the last time. Feeling that his wife is still nostalgic to live her past, the distraught Albert, pointing to the picture on the wall, tells Genya: "It fits! It matches! Why look! Look up there! Look! The green corn\_ taller than a man! It struck you fancy, didn't it? Why of course it would! The dense corn high above your heads, eh? The summer trysts! But I -I married in November! Not a word! I you'll be ludicrous, you're so confounded!" (CIS , The Rail, 393) In Freudian terms, this picture

has "seemingly emasculated the father" [13] in Albert and is responsible for his fury which he admits in the following: "Anhr! Do I believe the Sun? Why I've sensed it for years I tell you! I've stubbed my feet against it at every turn and tread. It's been in my way, tangled me! And do you know how? Haven't you ever seen it? The why do weeks and weeks go by and I'm no man at all? No man as other men are? You know of what I speak! You ought to, having known others! I've been poisoned by a guess! Corruption has haunted me." (Ibid.) From these two passages, the readers know that there is a relationship of rivalry between Albert and Ludwig. This rivalry is shown through the contrast between seasons\_ winter and summer. Summer is seen the season of emotional security and tranquility. In contrast to summer, winter is viewed as the year time of emotional infuriation and irritation. Whenever summer comes, David feels secure at home unless his father comes home. It happens that the father and mother have an argument about David, with the father telling his wife that he should accompany and help him to drive a horse and a milk wagon to get their living, and the mother persuading the father not to take David with him for he does not afford the heat of the sun in summer and the icy roads in winter. To the mother's response that it is so hard for a child to bear the sun heat, the father says that his work is better in "summer than the winter." (CIS, The Rail, p. 266) Psychologically, the father's desire to send his son to work is a desire to bring him out of home for being his Oedipal rival. Unable to have a role in the industrial and commercial world of America, Albert has become more brutal in his relationship with his family. To compensate for his feelings of being an outcast and having failed to have work in the printing trade or as a milkman, Albert desires to achieve complete domination inside his home. David keeps recalling his father's dreadful pictures, pictures that tell readers about Albert's stressed and stressful character. Terrified, David recalls: "pictures of the door being kicked open and his father coming in looking pale and savage and sitting down like old men sit down, one trembling hand behind him groping for the chair. He wouldn't speak. His Jaws, and even joints, seemed to have become fused together by a withering rage." (CIS, The Cellar, p. 22) Albert's hostility and bad temper inside home makes David have a wish to kill him. Such wish recurs unconsciously in his dreams: "of father's footsteps booming on the stairs, of the glistening doorknob turning, and of himself clutching at knives he couldn't lift from the table." (Ibid.) In fact, such a wish has something to do with Albert's violent world which unwillingly David enters. Albert has sent David, who has no knowledge of what job his father has, to his employer to retrieve his father's last

paycheck after losing his job as a printer. Albert's employer, having seen David and how nice a kid he is, says that one day Albert, after a quarrel with a man, has almost brained him with a hammer, a symbol of power used by the father and consequently responsible for his son's continuous fear of him. Having left his father's violent world with a bundle of his things, David comes to imagine that a hammer is being raised over his head by his terrifically outrageous father. Such an image makes him "motionless on the stair, terrified at having to confront the reality" (CIS, The Cellar, p. 27) The image of the hammer in a hand is also envisioned by David after his father has learned from Yussie, a street boy and David's friend, that David has kicked him in his nose. Full of wrath, Albert, without knowing why his son has done this, snatches the clothes hanger up and strikes David violently. In response to Genya's question how he could do this to his only son, Albert says: "Don't tell me that! I don't want to hear it! He's no son of mine! Would he were dead at my feet ... I'm harboring a fiend! A butcher! And you're protecting him! Those hands of his will beat me yet! I know! My blood warns me of this son! This son!" (CIS, The Cellar, p. 85) Albert fears that his son will kill him one day. Some other symbols of power are used by David's tyrannical father. In addition to the hammer, a whip is also used to show one's power, domination, and control. Many times the image of the whip recurs throughout the novel. Thinking that David has invaded the cheddar to steal, the Rabbi threatens to use his scourge. Albert also uses it as David informs him that two street boys have come near the milk wagon and have stolen two bottles of milk. Informed of this robbery, Albert immediately curses his son, calling him a fool and threatening him to pay back the price of these two bottles, and whips the horse savagely so as to reach the thieves. Describing Albert's rage, Roth says: "Little by little, his father's dark face grew grey, the fierce blaze in his eyes clouding. In these trembling hands, the reins began to shake out in tiny ripples. His hoarse breath grew louder, rushing through his burred throat in short violent gasp that set his jaw quivering each time as if on springs." (CIS, The Rail, pp.281- 282) The whip is also handed to Albert by David himself when Albert knows that David has helped Leo to have sex with Esther in return for a rosary\_ a Christian symbol that David gets and outrages his father. Feeling guilty of his act, David has given the whip to Albert to whip him. Psychologically speaking, David, by handing the whip to his father, is seen as surrendering to the father's "phallic symbol," [12] the symbol that Albert purchases when he chooses an artifact to decorate the family's apartment. Like Genya's picture, Albert's artifact reveals something about his past and tyranny towards his father. Albert's artifact, "a wooden plaque

with bull's horns,"[14] illustrates his nostalgic attitude towards his childhood and youth he has spent on a farm in Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia. Hating his father for his cruelty towards him, Albert has let his father die in front of his eyes. In fact, Albert's conflicting relationship with his father parallels David's strained relationship with Albert. Having betrayed his father, Albert in return "expects betrayal from David." [13] Feeling responsible for and guilty of his father's death, Albert fears a punishment from his son. Psychologically speaking, Albert's artifact is an icon of his physical strength, triumph, and control. Feeling that Genya has spoiled David for making him ignorant of her past and consequently why she has married Albert, the father, proud of his power, asks his wife why she hasn't revealed to him that he has succeeded to put an end to his father's life. The father-son tense relationship is clear in Albert's warning speech: "Didn't she tell you that my father and I had quarreled that morning that he struck me, and I vowed I would repay him? There was a peasant watching us from a far. Didn't she tell you that? ... I could have seized the stick when the bull wrenched it from my father's hand... But I never lifted a finger! I let him be gored!" (CIS, *The Rail*, p. 390) Jealous of his father, David strives to put an end to his father's triumph by his suicidal attempt. It is only before the end of the novel and after David, in an attempt at purifying himself, electrocutes himself, that the father and the mother come to confront each other. Albert tells his wife: "What are you waiting for? Unmask yourself! I've been unmasked to you for years. All these years you said nothing. Why? You knew why! I would have asked you what I've just asked you now! I would have said why did they [her parents] let you marry me. There must have been something wrong... But don't think there was no stir in this silence. All these years my blood told me! Whispered to me whenever I looked at him, nudged me, told me he wasn't mine!" (CIS, *The Rail*, p. 391) It is only after such confrontation and David's attempt at suicide that father and mother get united and David feels triumphant. Describing the feelings of the Schearls, Roth says: "Before him stood his mother, looking tense and startled, her hand resting on his father's shoulders, and below, seated, his father cheek on fist, eyes lifted, sourly glowering, affronted, questioning with taut and whip like stare... It seemed to David that the whole ages passed in the instant they regarded each other frozen in their attitude ... For the briefest moment David felt a shrill, wild surge of triumph whip within him, triumph that his father stood slack-mouthed, finger-clawing, stooped and then the moon suddenly darkened and revolved." (CIS, *The Rail*, p. 434) It is worth noting that the bull's horns are also associated with the idea of "cuckoldry," [13] and of false paternity that Albert

usually, with the use of a " rather derogatory expression" [13] like 'that' or 'this', expresses in front of the family's boarder and employer, Luter whose visits to the Schearls are meant to satisfy his sexual desires towards the mother. Luter's presence in the Schearls' apartment seems to threaten the relationship between Albert and David with Genya. Though Genya does not accept Luter's sexual advances to her, she seems to be saddened when Luter quits living with them after a quarrel, Genya feels that she is responsible for, between him and Albert. Aware of the sexual flavor of Luter's visits to his mother and Luter's desire to be alone with her, David comes to regard Luter as his foe. Introduced earlier to the morally fallen world and forced to "play bad" (CIS, *The Cellar*, p. 53) with the neighbor's daughter, Annie, in the foul, rat-infested, dark, and menacing cellars of his tenement building, David fantasizes that his mother has also played the sex game he is taught by Annie, with Luter. Wandering alone in the streets of New York with this dirty thought in his mind, David finds himself lost. It is due to this terrible experience inside home and outside preceding his suicidal attempt that David desires to sleep. To sleep means to lose consciousness. It is only by sleeping that David would be able to shun the violent world and nightmares he has envisioned and the dark experience he has gone through. The novel ends with David's sleep wish, a wish so telling of his psyche and is connected, symbolically speaking, with the readers' wish to complete reading such a frustrating (my emphasis) novel: "He might as well call it sleep. It was only toward sleep that every wink of the eyelids could strike a spark into the cloudy tinder of the dark, kindle out of shadowy corners of the bedroom such myriad and such vivid jests of images... It was only toward sleep one knew himself still lying on the cobbles under him... and feel, not pain, no terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence." (CIS, *The Rail*, p. 441)

**Conclusion:** Reading Henry Roth's novel, *Call It Sleep*, one concludes that Roth has written it as an outlet to his troubled psyche. It seems that at the time Roth writes *Call It Sleep* his mind is so chaotic. Because of his chaotic mind, he looks so ambivalent in his attitudes towards Americanization. Because of an inner conflict between his desire to keep his Jewish values and to acquire new American values, he comes to lose his identity. The environment plays a very significant role in forming the identity of his characters. Working on this theme, Roth sets his novel in dark, dirty, slum neighborhood tenements of New York society. Through the Schearls' experience in these tenements, Roth wants to give his readers a message that it is so difficult for an immigrant to find himself in a multi-cultural and multi-lingual

economic world. Living in such a world, one would suffer from psychic troubles\_ alienation, disintegration, and ultimately insanity. Rather than seeing America as a world that helps immigrants get united, Roth feels that it increases an immigrant's sense of estrangement. In such a partisan and corrupted world like America, it is not surprising for

an immigrant to have difficulties and not to lead a serene life. Having failed to cope with this world, Roth writes an open ending novel. The novel closes with David, the Schearls' son , wishing to sleep so as to escape the terrifying world he and his family have found themselves in.

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