

MOURNER AND REJOICER IN YEHUDA AMICHAÏ'S *ALL THE GENERATIONS BEFORE ME*

Dr. J. Bobby Rajakanthi, Associate Professor and Head, PG & Research Department of English,
Muthurangam Govt. Arts College (Autonomous), Vellore-2

Abstract

Yehuda Amichai is a popular Jewish poet who introduced Hebrew poetry to the readers of English and many other languages. His poetic intelligence explored Hebrew's levels of diction. Amichai's poetry are expressions of his religious experiences, political experiences and psychological experiences etc. in relation to the meaning of life and death. Born in Germany as Ludwig Pfeuffer to an orthodox Jewish family, escaped to Jerusalem during holocaust. Jerusalem, the holy city binds him in each and every aspect of the poet's life that, he is unable to divorce the day-to-day life issues in his poems. As it is said in Amichai's Poetry Foundation he has a *rare ability for transforming the personal, even private, love situation, with all its joys and agonies, into everybody's experience, making his own time and place general*. This paper aims to analyse how Yehuda Amichai is bound by his country Israel and its experiences in everyday life in his poem *All the Generations Before Me*. Despite being a short poem the poet, right from the beginning to the end reflects his emotional self as a mourner and a rejoicer. His mourning is turned into rejoicing as he finally reconciles with the promise of Yahweh to his Israel through his ancestors.

Key words: Mourner, Rejoicer, Jerusalem, Yahweh and Yehuda Amichai.

Yehuda Amichai, Israel's most acclaimed and widely translated (from Hebrew) in the world is a German Jew. He was accorded a great deal of respect notably because of his age, wisdom and as his poetry was a way of reckoning with the complexities of the life. His crafting of poems turned to sort it as well with a different perspective.

Amichai was the first to write in colloquial Hebrew. His use of colloquial language drew the ire of Hebrew critics but was found to be simple and illuminating. He extracted heavily and creatively from Biblical and Liturgical Hebrew for his use of vernacular, which aided to conceptualize his life experiences in most of his poetical works. *All the Generations Before Me* is one such portrayal, which is a sensational and personal reflection of his experience about nazi period.

The human reflections of the poet portray ironic mirroring of man's destiny in a world of divisions and hierarchies. The poem focuses on the realm of psyche of the poet and the thematic obsession to disclose the withdrawn self that turns inward and onto the inner regions of his turbulent mind. An obsession for this sort of professionalism won him a definite space for himself among the Jewish writers. Moreover, this also paved a way to express and address a range of larger issues pertaining to human conditions in Israel and perplexity in the lens of modern sensibility. The conscious crafting of this poem is rendered with great caution as a co-action of the cognizant and the comatose. He treats a world of stark realities which begins and ends in the innermost regions of psyche of the Jewish people.

The Jewish diaspora is the base malady which afflicted the emotional quotient of the speaker. Diaspora connotes a sense of uprootedness which is unnatural and as a state where people have a dual cultural allegiance living as a denigrated minority, stripped of their rights in the host society and in this sense a cultural condition not premised on any particular history.

According to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy 28:25 in the Bible, diaspora is a word for chastisement, where dispersion is conditional on the Jews not respecting the law of Yahweh. It follows that diaspora belongs not to the domain of history, but of theology. The curse for disobedience, has left the scattered Jews with the emotional and social ties with the homeland. So being committed to the restoration of the homeland to a point where it shapes their identity and their regard to the ancestral home as true home is a common notion alongside Jewish diaspora and it also refers to the blessings for obedience to the laws of Yahweh, as cited in the same Old Testament book, Deuteronomy 28:3 and is also confirmed in Psalms 147:2 which is well articulated in this poem of Amichai.

The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel.

This experience in the life of the speaker has left a void in the understanding leading to psychic conflicts, neurosis and death. His poems are indirectly peopled with sensitive individual either male or female, who find themselves pitched against “the hostile or indifferent forces of the family or the society leading to suffering and unmitigated loneliness” (Pciucco 137). The Jewish diaspora has dislocated the minds of the Jews to be ostracized from their cultural practices and pressurized them to yield to the cultural practices of the immigrant countries. This rude shock or “away from an indigenous or established homeland has altered their ego and the same is expressed in Yehudai Amichai’s poem *All the Generation Before Me*”.

The poem *All the Generations Before Me* signifies the wobbling emotional self of the poet; as a mourner and a rejoicer. It reflects the poet’s binary emotional display of his mourning and rejoicing over the situation he faces. Though it seems incomprehensible that both mourning and rejoicing can be a reality, yet somehow it is. We can hold joy in one hand, even when we are not ready to release grief from the other. The sheer exhilaration of new life and new ventures, and a renewed hope for the future has made the poet to be a overcomer.

The poet being a spiritual Jew, has lived in dependence on Yahweh to soar above his circumstances according to biblical teachings however painful it may be. Romans 5: 3-4 in New Testament of the Bible says:

3. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

4. perseverance, character; and character, hope.

He understands that the beauty of mourning over losses can and will lead to rejoicing in perseverance, character and hope. Mourning or Grieving is a reaction to loss or painful situations. It is the name given to the process of coping. It is a healthy process of feeling comforted, coming to terms with loss and finding ways to adapt.

Mourning leads one to redeem the resilience and stamina that has been vanished in the shock of a loss. It is like a Gordian knot and cannot be measured with a single scale; long mourning and short mourning. Neither the long mourning of Hamlet for his father is not necessarily repetitious nor the short mourning of Viola in *The Twelfth Night* is not necessarily insufficient.

Finding Joy does not negate our need to or right to grieve. In fact, rushing past into the arms of Joy is an attempt to escape pain of mourning which is unwise. We cannot truly heal unless we attend to that and ignoring only aggravates them and leaves us open to the risk of more serious setbacks. When we navigate through painful situations by mourning and accepting the situation we are in, comes the rejoicing. It’s well said by Jesus Christ in the sermon on the mount in one the Beatitudes that

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted

Mourning is turned into gladness according to the following Old Testament scriptural passage in the book of Isaiah 61:3

To comfort all who mourn

To grant those who mourn in Zion,

Giving them a garland instead of ashes

The oil of gladness instead of mourning...

The above said is well claimed in the lines of the poem *All Generations Before Me* of Yehuda Amichai which has clearly portrayed him to be a Mourner and Rejoicer. The poet emphasizes how an effective mourning empowers oneself in terms of healthy mentality and in turn makes him to be a rejoice.

The poet mourns for his cultural dislocation. He is removed from the cultural practices of Jerusalem, the holy city: to which the poet is attached by tradition, lineage, language, religion, history and politics. He mourns because all of these binds him to his country.

My name’s my donor’s name

It binds.

He mourns the loss of his country and set of ideals that can no longer adequately conciliate his new world that emanates from deeply unconscious sources.

Everything cinches him: his ancestry, place of birth, upbringing, name, age, material conditions, psychological conditions, social conditions, etc. When the protagonist is enforced to give up which ever has bound him, he starts to intensely mourn recollecting everything that has made him as a person of his country and thus he says

*All the generations before me
Donated me, bit by bit, so that I'd be
erected all at once
here in Jerusalem ...*

The poet further grieves as he realizes the prophecies of his country prophesied by the great prophets are not fulfilled and that he is becoming older day by day. The people of Jerusalem are called as Jews. They believe that Jerusalem is a holy city and Yahweh is their god. In the Hebrew bible, Yahweh and the Israelites have a formal agreement between each other. In the Old Testament Bible, the book of Genesis portrays Yahweh who has a strong relationship with the ancestors of Israel. He promises to provide Abraham and his descendants with the land of Israel. Books of the Bible such as Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy also explains the conditions of the covenant that Israel, the nation will suffer punishment and exile if the people do not observe Yahweh's will.

In Israel's history, right from the reign of King David to modern times, there are series of wars and invasions. In 1948, Jerusalem was divided between Israel and Jordan and in a surprise attack in 1967 Israel defeated Egypt, Jordan and Syria in six days. The poet took part in the 'six day' war in the year 1967 because his mind, heart and soul is knitted with the emotions of his ancestors. Hence, he states:

*...here in Jerusalem, like a house of prayer
or charitable institution.
It binds. My name's
My donor's name
It binds.*

He strongly believes that it was Yahweh, who offered his land through a covenant and none can take hold of it. So, when he takes part in the 'six-day' war and faces victory along with his country he rejoices. The poet portrays himself as a rejoicer, rejoicing about the prophecies that Yahweh gave to Moses that the Jews are entitled to the promised land as quoted in the Bible. Yehuda Amichai is intensely spiritual and ironically rejoices about his and as well his people's destiny in the holy city, despite the world of divisions and hierarchies.

*I'm approaching the age
Of my father's death. My last
Will's patched with many patches
I have to change my life and death
Daily to fulfill all the prophecies
Prophecied for me. So they are not lies ...*

Here the poet becomes a mourner when he thinks about the age that he approaches as his father's as he has to accept death. He mourns that he has to make many additional patches to his will before he dies. He actually does not prefer to be a mourner. So he turns to be a rejoicer. His mourning turns into rejoicing when he reconciles himself to adapt to the changes of both life and death. His mourning empowers his weak mentality and psychology and hence he rejoices in the hope of fulfillment of all the prophecies prophesied for him. Due to dislocation, the poet undergoes a psychic conflict pitched between the roots of his own country and the country which he is placed in.

His experience of struggling existence in Israel, his predicament in the sensation of private moments against the scenery of history, social conditions, lineage and religion are expressed explicitly in his poem *All The Generation Before*. He wrenches and twists as a mourner when he broods about his age that

I've passed forty
There are jobs I cannot get

Because of this
In despair he also mourns
... were I in Auschwitz
They would not have sent me out to work,
but gassed me straight away.

But the poet projects himself as a rejoicer when he recollects that like his ancestors, he was not gassed straight away in the Nazi camp.

Ceaselessly the poet expresses in *All The Generation Before* me as a Rejoicer and Mourner translating his emotions in an apt manner and that in *The American Poetry Review, May-June 2016*, David Biespiel has rightly remarked about Yehuda Amichai that

He translates the hardness of existence into new tenderness; tenderness into spiritual wonder that is meant to quiet outrage; and outrage into a mixture of worry and love and warmth ... He is one of the great joyful lamenters of all time, endlessly documenting his anguish, throbbing pains, mistaken dreams, shortages of faith, abundances of ecstatic loves, and humiliations.

In *All the Generations Before Me* the poet has distinctly and convincingly nailed his cultural, historical, religious, social and lineage memories which have interacted in his emotions and thoughts and perhaps delineates him both as a Rejoicer and Mourner. As a rejoicer, he sees within him and his people an invisible calling, purpose and destiny of the Promised Land-Israel and Holy city and as a Mourner he laments for the delay in the same but the poet finally shifts his psyche into acceptance and that Paul Celan has aptly written in his letter to Amichai;

What really belongs to you in your poems comes through with the most convincing, most conspicuous force. You are the poem you write, the poem you write is ... you yourself. --

Works Cited

- Amichai, Yehuda. *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*. translated by Chana Block and Stephen Mitchell, Expanded ed., U of California, 1996.
- Amichai, Yehuda. *The selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*. translated by Assia Gutmann and Harold Schimmel Harmonds worth : Penguin Books. 1971.
- Amichai, Yehuda. "All Things Considered" *Love, war and History: Israel's Yehuda Amichai*, 22 April 2007. 4.30 p.m. Audio Speech.
- Amichai, Yehuda. *Song of Jerusalem and Myself*. translated by Harold Schimmel. New York : Harper & Row, 1973.
- Amichai, Yehuda. " Songs of Jerusalem and Myself" *The American Poetry Review*, vol.9,no.1,May- June 2016,pp.45-48. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41442479. Accessed 24 Mar.2021.
- Rose - Kubler, Elisabeth. " Understanding the Five Stages of Grief" *Cruse Bereavement Care*, www.cruse.org.uk. Accessed 12 Feb.2021.
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yehuda_Amichai#cite_note-PoetryFoundation-12