

The Façade of Wandering Israeli and the Reality of Jewish National Attachment; Revisiting Eshkol Nevo's *Neuland*

Neha Soman¹, Dr. B. Padmanabhan²

¹Research Scholar (PhD), Department of English, Bharathiar University

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bharathiar University

Abstract: Eshkol Nevo, one of the Israel's most celebrated writers deliberates on the Jewish concepts of home and belonging all through his works. His attempt to define Jewish experience in Israel cannot be limited to a single narrative pattern as it undergoes changes with relation to Israel's changing views over diaspora, identity and nationality. In *Neuland*, Nevo conjures the images of young Israelis who are disordered and emotionally detached from the state. The novel is viable to be interpreted in both the ways, one in which the predicament of Jewish unsettlement is high lightened, and the other where an optimistic future of Israel is offered emphasising on the reality of Jewish national attachment. This article attempts to reread *Neuland* in the later perspective focusing on the author's emphasise on the reawakening of Jewish national consciousness.

Keywords: Jewish national attachment, wandering, settlement, identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

In an interview published in the website of Jewish Book Council, Eshkol Nevo acknowledges that wandering does not threaten their Israeli identity as they (new generation of Israelis) were born in the land of Israel and less haunted by the ghosts of past. He reaffirms the fact that Israelis are not intimidated by the thought of travelling or living outside Israel for a while. The reawakening of Zionism demands more from Israel than the state "being a safe autonomic territory for Jews" as they have surpassed the phase of survival and now searching for more value to their national identity. His examination of rootedness versus diasporic attachments in *Neuland* contributes to a deeper reading of Israel's concern over home and belonging. The history of Israeli statehood represents the new Jew to be an antithesis of the wandering Jew of diaspora. The great diaspora began after the two tragic wars plotted against the Jews by the Romans in 70 C.E and 132 C.E. A million Jews were killed in the wars, many of them were sold into slavery and the rest were banished from Jerusalem. They were scattered around the globe and lived a powerless and often persecuted life in communities. The fate of Jewish diaspora was dependent on the treatment of Jewish citizens in the receiving countries. None of the settlements was permanent due to the domineering aspects of dictatorships and the spread of anti-Semitic policies, resulting in the eventual emigration of Jews from one country to the other. But a significant change can be observed in the concept of Jewish diaspora since the establishment of Israel in 1948. The final settlement in the land of Israel had made them oblivious towards traveling abroad in search of peace and tranquility. The configuration of new Jew is deeply rooted in the establishment principles of Israel. These principles are identified as ideas infused with distinct psychological and emotional senses by the Israeli historian Anita Shapira in her work *Land and Power; The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881-1948*. She states that "the accumulated impact of diverse sources (e.g., ancient Jewish tradition, nineteenth-century nationalism and socialist- revolutionary ideology) gave rise to a complex and varied collective personality. . ." (354) The Zionist state has become a territory where the Jews could "acquire, settle, develop and defend." (Johnson 531) But the Sabras (Jewsborn in Israel) claim more from the ethos of Zionism and Israel as they are not threatened by the crisis of existence.

The problem of wandering is not limited to Sabra, but it becomes the most concerned issue of contemporary Israeli fiction. The treatment of wandering Israelis has been a central theme of works of literature such as Amos Oz's *A Perfect Peace* (1982), A.B. Yehoshua's *Late Divorce* (1982), Yotam Reuveni's "Mixed Tendency" (1982) and Arie Semo's *Masquerade* (1983). All these works examine the Sabra's intense obsession with wandering which is also the most "painful aspect of *Yerida*, namely, the emigration of Israeli-born." (Zerubavel 127) Contrary to this scenario, Nevo creates an optimistic future for Israel where the basic premises of Zionist dream are not threatened. He reemphasizes on the fact that Israelis, despite their attempts to detach themselves from the homeland, will yearn for return as their identities are deep rooted in the land of Israel. This paper will attempt to recognise the latent patterns of national attachment exhibited by the new Jews of Israel in Eshkol Nevo's *Neuland*. The novel stands unique in contemporary Israeli literature with its unique approach towards capturing the unembellished reality of human life in Israel.

II. NEULAND; A TALE OF HOME AND IDENTITY

At the outset, Nevo's *Neuland* might appear contradictory to the ideology behind the creation of Israel itself but a deeper dissection of the text reaffirms what the history has already been portrayed. In *Neuland*, a war veteran haunted by the memories of his lost wife and the traumatic experiences in the war travels to South America leaving behind his family in Israel. His son Dori goes in search of his father only to realize that he himself was escaping from the reality of Israel. His acquaintance with other Israeli wanderers during the journey ignites his rootedness in the homeland. The journey becomes a process of introspection at the end of which Dori resolves his dilemma of belongingness. By dividing the novel into three phases (predicament of belongingness, the journey and the return), one might observe that on the surface, Nevo seems to be confusing his readers through his characters who exhibit the tendency to wander even after their settlement in Israel but when the narrative gets intensified, each character is self-enlightened and realizes their belongingness to Israel. Here, Nevo highlights on the transformation of Israel from a geographical territory to a spatial embodiment of Jewish ethnic and national identity.

III. THE PREDICAMENT OF BELONGINGNESS

In the initial phase of the novel, Nevo unravels the mystery of unsettled Jewish life which is contradictory to the founding principles of Israel. When the novel begins, readers are introduced to the protagonists, Dori and Inbar through a discourse of e-mail conversations where they exchange passionate emotions of concern and hope. The narrative exemplifies the possibility of a journey (physical and spiritual) which the characters would have undergone in the past and only later does the author reveal the predicaments that had led to the journey and how the process had illuminated their lives. Dori's father disappeared and left back a bunch of journals which he had written about the journey of enlightenment, leading to the hints about his possible whereabouts. Dori goes in pursuit of his father leaving behind his wife (who is impassive) and son in Israel. But he is distrustful of his intentions. "Business or pleasure? the driver continues his interrogation. Neither, Dori admits." (Nevo 20) Though he is concerned about his father's disappearance, Dori manipulates the situation as a chance to escape from his monotonous life in Israel. He fears that his life would be meaningless if he continues to live in a place which offers him nothing. Intensifying his existential dilemmas, Dori's wife Roni is extremely passive and shows no compassion to strengthen their relationship.

Right at the beginning, during their first months together, she told him that she didn't know how to miss anyone. And that he shouldn't be hurt by it. That's how it is with kibbutz survivors. When you cry for your mother all night in the children's house and no one comes to you . . . I don't know . . . my missing mechanism must have got screwed up, she tried to explain once. (Nevo 117)

Roni hailed from Kibbutz, a collective community in Israel that followed the combined principles of socialism and Zionism. Soon after the recognition of Israel as the national home for Jews in 1948, the Arab residents broke out a riot which resulted in the mass massacre of Jews. Roni survived the riot but she lost her family. The memories of the past haunted her even after years and unfortunately she was abandoned from any emotional support. The childhood trauma of bloodshed and isolation caused the blockade of emotional ventilation resulting in Roni's socially disapproved behaviour. Her marriage to Dori thus became ineffective as she failed to engage in any emotional association with her husband. Though Dori made several attempts to release her from the pain of the past, she could not free herself from the memories which even disrupted her present. Roni further justifies her actions saying that the Kibbutz survivors are all the same as the history had shown so much of cruelty towards them. Dori empathised his wife and did not force her to further his

favours. But in the process of emotional detachment, he lost his sanity. Dori began to find reasons to stay away from his family and the land itself. "There was no more air for me in Israel, Inbari. I had to leave" (Nevo 256). Dori confesses that the journey was an escape from all the suffocations that haunted him in Israel. The land could not give him peace. His family was broken, his wife abandoned him and his son showed hatred towards him which was extremely painful. He made himself believe that escape is inevitable to keep himself sane. He had to leave Israel, as the land filled the void within him with so much of misery and solitude. On the other hand, Inbar buried her insecurities and pretended to be a spirited woman who aspires to enrich her career as a travel writer. But she felt lonely everywhere, "Of all places. Many times, she'd felt that there was not a single person in the group who was close to her." (Nevo 209) She was preoccupied with the thought of her life in another place to escape from her complex life in Israel. Yael Zerubavel in his article "The 'Wandering Israeli' in Contemporary Israeli Literature" elaborates on the fundamental problem of Israeli emigration. From his perspective "not only those who have actually left the country threaten to destroy early dreams about the Sabra and the Jewish society in Israel but those who obsessively fantasize about life in another place . . . are symbolically a part of the syndrome of the wandering Israeli." (128) For Dori and Inbar, Israel appeared to be a place with no attachments as they were unable to connect with the nation physically and emotionally. It was unarguably a menace proposed against the security and coexistence ensured in the land of Israel as the emergence of wandering Israeli is contradictory to the ideology of Zionist movement. Here, the vision of the founding fathers is challenged with the inconsistency between the mission and reality of Israel. The fathers (pioneers) dreamt of nursing a new type of Jew in Israel who is "young, energetic, resourceful, assertive, and self-reliant." (Zerubavel 128) But in contrast, Dori and Inbar, representing the new Jew make their choice of leaving the state in pursuit of peace.

IV. THE JOURNEY OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The phase of journey that begins at two different places with the same latent intention turns out to be enlightening in the lives of both the characters. Their arrival at Neuland, a shadow state with utopian values formed by Dori's father to spiritually cleanse the souls of wandering Jews evokes the sense of belongingness within them. Neuland does not replace Israel but feeds the source country. Dori and Inbar realize the undeniable presence of national attachment which they had carried within them, no matter how hard they attempt to detach themselves from Israel. What intensifies the sense of national attachment is the vision of an imagined community when they are in a group sharing the same national identity. Nevo captures the significance of social groups in defining national attachment by creating a society where the people of same origin gather and evoke their national identity. The whole system of Neuland is not limited to a utopian setting. It is a place where the scattered Jews are rehabilitated. The settlement provides a temporary home for the disturbed Jews of Israel.

We have our own language here, and sometimes I forget that other people don't know it. If you read the information pages you received, you will see that Neuland is described as a 'community therapeutic space'. The basic principle of . . . your father's vision- also because of his own personal experience- is that life in the source country, in Israel, is an ongoing trauma. And everyone who comes from there is wounded to some degree or another. (Nevo 510)

It was a communal therapeutic space established in favour of the wounded Jews. Surprisingly it was Dori's father who had built Neuland to envision the future of Israel. He believed that the sanctification of Israel is possible only by rehabilitating the Jews who are wounded to some degree or another. Thus, the basic principle of Neuland is to help the Jews in Israel to overcome the trauma of the past. There are undoubtedly distinct approaches to treat the inhabitants as the trauma experienced by each individual differs in its nature. For instance, the first generation of wounded are more haunted by the memories of the holocaust but the second generation is disturbed by the guilt of not experiencing the pain and agony that the preceding generation had undergone. Dori's father inherited the principles of Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism who in his novel *Altneuland* presents a utopian society resembling a modern welfare state. But Neuland is functionally different from *Altneuland* as in Neuland, an individual is the center of progression. It was believed that Neuland will evolve in the hearts of every Jew even when he is Israel. Neuland is not a substitute for Israel but it envisions a strong and peaceful community of Jews flourishing in Israel.

But metaphorically, Neuland offers much profound meanings to the national identity of the Jewish populace. Though, the settlement is recognised as a therapeutic space, it provides a favorable circumstance for the Jews to identify their national attachment towards Israel which in case was denied in the land of Israel itself. Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* defines nation as "an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and

sovereign". (6) He states that the members of a community will create a mental image of their communion despite them being physically separated from one another. Members of a nation might not be familiar with all of their fellow-members but this does not stop them from forming images of their communion. Unlikely, in *Neuland*, most of the characters are emotionally detached despite their physical proximity. They exhibit an unusual tendency to disconnect themselves from the nation itself. For instance, Dori's pessimistic attitude towards his life in Israel resulted from his inability to consider the nation as a whole. Similarly, Inbar also fails to relate her life with the members of her community. Thus, the reawakening of national attachment becomes a significant factor in establishing a meaningful social life in Israel and what Neuland offers is a space where the disturbed Jews can renew themselves to evoke the sense of national consciousness. Nevo here, points at the fact that nationalism and national consciousness are innate sensations, ethnically inherited throughout generations but the intensity in which these sensations are manifested differ with relation to the historical factors. Jewish history for instance carries the excruciating tales of displacement and rootlessness and it is comprehensible that their receptivity of Israel as a national homeland might have undergone uncertainty. But that does not discard the possibility of Jewish national attachment experienced by both the Israelites and the Jews of Diaspora. Anderson comments on the undeniable existence of national attachment in his *Imagined Communities* stating that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7) and what Nevo identifies is this sense of Jewish fraternity leading to their collective social life in Israel.

V. CONCLUSION; THE RETURN

The final phase, where the Jews return to Israel from Neuland points at a hopeful future for the source society. Nevo does not embellish his narrative with superfluous evidences rather he portrays life in its truest form possible. Though Neuland offers a sanctified life for the Jews, it does not transform the entire functioning of Israel. It would be undoubtedly exaggerative, if at the end, Israel was restored into a welfare state with no imperfections. But Nevo invites his readers to a non-dramatic climax where the characters embrace their imperfect lives in Israel with all its ambiguities. Dori and Inbar return to Israel knowing that nothing would have changed there. Dori goes back to his family with no significant expectations and Inbar makes herself ready to face her problems in Israel rather than running away from them. They exhibit the ability to accept the reality and make themselves better to adapt to the situation in action and Neuland functioned to strengthen the Jews by evoking their national consciousness by making them realise their rootedness in Israel. Nevo here, contemplates on what Israel and the Jews expect from each other especially in the contemporary scenario. He emphasises on the fact that Jews are no longer induced by the act of wanderism as for them, Israel is already a national homeland and it is their responsibility to add more values to their nationality and to enrich their existence in Israel. Since the final settlement had ensured the accumulation of dispersed Jews, the new Jew aimed at extending the trajectory of Zionism in Israel to the preservation of Jewish national identity. Nevo is assertive of the fact that the act of wandering is transitory since Israel has expanded its vision to a more philosophical note of strengthening national identity. The novel reaffirms the nature of national attachment as an innate phenomenon which cannot be disturbed by momentary fascinations and disapprove the concern of wandering Israeli.

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