



The Nuances of Cultural Memory in the Poetry of Yehuda Amichai.

Mahaswetha Devi P.S, Mphil Scholar in English, Noorul Islam Centre For Higher Education, Kumaracoil, Thuckalay, Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract

Over the last twenty years, the relationship between culture and memory has emerged in many parts of the world as a key issue of interdisciplinary research involving humanities, media studies, neurosciences and natural sciences. As a medium of cultural memory, literature is omnipresent with its wide genres like the dime novel, the historical novel, fantasy fiction, romantic comedies, war movies, soap operas and digital stories. Both popular and trivial literature as well as canonized and high literature have continued to serve as media of memory. They fulfill a multitude of mnemonic functions such as the imaginative creation of past life worlds, the transmissive images of history, the negotiation of competing memories and the reflection of processes and problems of cultural memory. Literature permeates and resonates in memory culture. The manifestations of cultural memory in Amichai's poetry reveals new dimensions of the parametres of the catastrophe following the perpetual atrocities of the Jewish race. The reminiscence of the past, the present and all of time is vividly captured within the ambit of cultural memory and hence a sophisticated study of Amichai's enormous contribution is obligatory. His writings serve as the point of departure and as a model and metaphor for the reflection of significance of literature in the cultural life of the Jewish society besides the construction of individual and national identity. Amichai has been striving to relocate the site of memory using poetry as a network in which he shows that there is a unique combination of the profane and the sacred.

Key words: Cultural Memory, Jews, Holocaust, literary work, symbolic form, Eternal present, Time.

Introduction

Literature is one dedication mechanism of adding to the bigger conversation of the manners by which social orders recall their past. In the course of the most recent twenty years, the connection among culture and memory has developed in numerous pieces of the world as a main point of contention of interdisciplinary exploration. Memory itself being the feature of the creative mind; the capacity to reproduce in the brain is basically probably the best blessing given to man. Cultural memory as observed by Eril Astrid and Ann

Rigney, “has recently emerged as a useful umbrella term to describe the complex ways in which societies remember their past” (112). This cultural memory has advanced from "collective memory", which has a topical concentration and which is worried most importantly with distinguishing the destinations of memory. The idea of social memory is initially gotten from archeological investigations, first presented by the Egyptian, Jan Assman, in his book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992). Cultural memory accordingly, is viewed as an aggregate idea for all information that coordinates conduct and involvement with the intelligent structure of a general public which is rehashed through ages in cultural practice and commencement. One way or the other it jams culture and custom which is carried on the wings of time. Jan Assman and Aleida Assman characterized the idea of social memory through a twofold delimitation that recognizes it based on what is called 'everyday' or 'communicative memory' which they think need social trademark. Additionally as the enlightening memory is depicted by its proximity to the standard, social memory, as the Assmans kept up, is depicted by its great ways from the ordinary. Social memory has its fixed point; its edge of reference doesn't change with the movement of time. These fixed centres are pivotal functions of the past, whose memory is kept up through social arrangement as writings, customs, landmarks and institutional correspondence as recitation, practice, and recognition. The correspondence with the legacy of the past guides the craftsman in arriving at his very own and present day viewpoint. This is a common technique that Amichai embraces in his language and his substance.

Yehuda Amichai, the reluctant poet Laureate of Israel is one of the most celebrated of Hebrew poets in recent years. According to Jonathan Wilson, “He should have won the Nobel Prize in any of the last twenty years.” However, politics and the fact that “he came from the wrong side of the Stockade” (172) have denied him that honour. Amichai was a man of humble origin, born to an orthodox Jewish family in Würzburg, Germany, on 3 May, 1924. He migrated to Palestine in 1935 and consequently to Jerusalem in 1936. He volunteered and fought in World War II as a member of the British Army, Jewish Brigade and also in the Israeli War of Independence. In his entire poetic career that stretches over a period of about fifty years, Amichai has published more than 15 volumes of poetry in Hebrew, two novels, and a book of short stories. His works have been translated into over two score of language. As a poet, Amichai was first inspired by the works of Dylan Thomas and John Hopkins and to a great extent by T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden which he read during World War II, “I discovered them in the Egyptian desert in a half-ruined book. This book had an enormous impact on me—I think that was when I began to think seriously about writing poetry”. (Joseph 111)

Amichai's poetry emphasises the individual who is conscious and integrally part of the "collective memory" (Eshel 151), from which, according to Eril Astrid and Ann Rigney, cultural memory has evolved. The turmoil of living in a country that is frequently at war and the conflicting memory of his blessed childhood and the terrible holocaust have always been a major impact on Amichai as a poet. He doesn't preach or prophesy, but his ironies and his gift of recall provide a corrective to every kind of national complacency and intransigence. Here, the poet persona is confronted by the dilemma of being trapped in the pages of historical memory and between choosing an instant punishment and the unending yoke of burden. For the Jews cultural memory is also the remembrance that has been preserved in the scriptures. It is the medium through which cultural memory is transmitted. As far as Amichai's poetry is concerned there is a shift in the continuity from the Biblical into the secular. The memory of his childhood is the only remembrance that is warm to his heart in the midst of the atrocities of the Jews:

He who remembers his childhood better

Than others is the winner,

If there are any winners at all. (20-22)

("1924," A Life of Poetry 354)

The events of the past are crystallized in the poet's mind. Therefore, cultural memory remains potentially active in the present and it obliterates the conscious desires and interests in his poetic creativity. The essence of cultural memory in most cases emerged out of the transmissions from the past. The old scriptural beliefs and the Jewish traditions preserved in a culture that survived a series of long and severe tests serve for Amichai as a reservoir of insights and convey "a living sense of the rhythm of growth, flowering and decay":

I think of the miracle

Of splitting the Red Sea, of the children

Of Israel and Pharaoh's army:

The latter drowned in the sea,

And the former in thousands of years of history.

What's better? (7-12) ("Biblical Meditations," A Life of Poetry 228)

His works are remembrance of the past, the threats of the future, time and the vicissitudes of consciousness, the lasting and the ephemeral, change and forgetfulness, war, death, love and peace"(Abramson 4). Communication with the heritage of the past helps the artist to reach his own personal and modern point of view. This is a typical strategy that Amichai adopts in his own language and content. Cultural memory in Amichai 's poetry is linked not only to the three poles — culture, memory, and group — but also to the body of reusable material that is a thread of cultural continuity. This continuity expresses itself through the most decisive mode of transmission contained in the cultural archives of the community: language. This cultural continuation serves as the cornerstone of the culture, and that is what Amichai 's poetry is all about: personal record, a living museum in which the poet eternalizes his life. His poetry provides an important bridge between generations, making remembrance observable and creating a memory of its own. Amichai's poetry confronts the readers with unsettling emotions and compels them to see:

I have many times, like many watches

On the walls of a clock shop, each one shows a different time.

My memories are scattered over the earth

Like the ashes of a person who willed before his death

To burn his body

And scatter his ashes over seven seas. (10-15)

("Like the Streams in the Negev," A Life of Poetry 449)

The balance of time and memory is one of the most popular and intrinsic examples of Amichai. The many times shown by the watches and clocks on the walls of the clock store, recognise each of them not only by colour and size, but also by the difference in recorded time. These inanimate objects are alive and involved, evoking one's anticipation as flashes of memory from the past. Amichai's poetry illustrates how all generations are fused as one and how they are involved in the ensuing material, spiritual, and even secular continuation. The power to understand the human mind and to analyse human actions is not only to convey one's own thoughts, but to control one 's emotions as well as to engage one 's intellect. The complexities of remembrance

and the roles of collective memory in Amichai 's poetry are also expressed in the definitive use of the "photography" metaphor that captures the moment of time in the particular orbit of the frame. As in a portrait, the past cannot be experienced anymore but the moment of time is forever captured, signed, sealed and delivered. It is fascinating to know that the odd and imperative sense of Amichai 's name itself speaks volume to poetry that seeks to associate itself with the nation and its people. The name Yehuda, which in Hebrew means Judah, is synonymous with the Lion of Judah; a symbol of ancient Israeli military and political power (also of the promised Messiah) and Amichai combines Ami, which means "my nation" and Chai, meaning "life," ultimately forming, "My nation lives" ("The Poet Who Invented Himself"). This is a subject of significance when the personal attachment and commitments Amichai had for his nation, people and culture is considered. It also has to be acknowledged that throughout his poetic career he promoted nationalism and sang the praises of cosmopolitan militarism that impulsively inspired national unity and integrity.

For Amichai and the Jewish people, that primary place is Israel and 'Jerusalem the cradle city that rocks' ("Time No. 52", A Life of Poetry 289) him, is its centre. This city therefore is the fulcrum of the songs of lamentation and praise. Much to the tone of the Psalmist and the Biblical Lamentations, Amichai's poems of Jerusalem seek in the favour of humanity to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122.6; Ezra 7. 15) the dwelling of God. He implicitly satirises the resulting conflict and friction between the Jews and the Muslim communities over the city. He also projects his beloved love for this city of unrest and misery through his everlasting line of poetry. The relationship between the poet and his father, a symbolic reflection of man's relationship with God, is a recurring theme in Amichai 's poetry. This sweet friendship, bitter in separation and suffering caused by war and death, has left a very deep wound in the poet's heart that even God could not bandage but "peeps out of the cracks and misery in heart"(89). He acknowledged that events were very, very significant to him. He saw events, photographs and memories almost literally, like small plaques, symbols, artefacts, each with its own explanations, depictions, or codes. And each of these, wherever they may have taken place, is imaginatively imposed and stratified, beside or against another. The way he thinks, spatially and temporally, through poems. His sense of time is often connected to his sense of history. He thinks this is true for everyone; he thinks it is particularly true for Jews whose sense of history has literally helped to keep them alive. He is attempting to establish a kind of equality between his personal history and the history around him, since historical events frequently take place during periods that are metaphorically focused. Too much of

history, his individual and his collective history, included war, and he hates war. So that he hates history. He has experienced and his generation has experienced great and grievous historical disappointments. He says this not only with irony but with a stronger feeling. He often said that he considers himself a “post-cynical humanist.”

Conclusion

The subject matter of poetry for Amichai is not the collection of solid, static objects extended in space and time, but the life that is lived in the scenes that it composes. Amichai introduced a new style into the prosody of Hebrew verse which was both “disarming, and deceptive simple” (Bargard and Chayet 79). Amichai's knowledge and his profound rootedness in the social memory of the Jewish public has been broadly lauded and all around proclaimed by numerous individuals. This rootedness is his establishment for the development of individual and public character. He has arrived at the wide cross-area without trading off his craft. In a large number of Amichai's poems there are qualities of otherworldly verse. He is attracted to the utilization of mystical prides to animate the topical substances of his poems which are laying on the firm ground of philosophy and religion. This is how Amichai is called “the father of modern Hebrew Poetry” and “Israel's strongest candidate for the noble prize

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