
**'IN THE HEART OF A GREAT FOREIGN HOMELAND':
BI-ROOTED MIND-SET IN THE POEMS
OF RACHEL BLUWSTEIN AND LEAS GOLDBERG**

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The biographical and poetic similarity between Rachel Bluwstein (1890–1931) and Lea Goldberg (1911–1970) calls for a comparative study of the two poetesses, which were undertaken in the specific context of migrant literature, in light of the term “bi-rootedness”. Both Bluwstein and Goldberg had “double roots”, in Russia and in the Land of Israel, and this can be clearly seen in a “bi-rooted” mind-set manifest in their poems, which will be examined in this paper. In my analysis two manifestations of this “bi-rooted pain” will be observed: European memories and a yearning for the old homeland on the one hand, and the rejection of adapting to the new homeland on the other.

Key words: Migrant literature, exile, homeland, bi-rootedness, Russia, Land of Israel.

Introduction

Research subject. Migrant literature and the ‘pain of homelands’ in the poetry of Rachel Bluwstein and Lea Goldberg symbolize their cultural “bi-rootedness” and found an expression of both Russian and new Israeli cultures.

Literature review. The phenomenon of migration, and more specifically the idea of exile as involuntary migration, is a universal topic that has been widely discussed within the field called Diaspora Theories. Three kinds of approaches may be seen in coping with this field, the understanding of which is crucial in order to consider the question whether migration creates an identity crisis.

The traditional approach stresses the dimension of suffering in the migrator’s experience [14] and marks the migrator or exile as an outsider, perhaps even a crippled individual [2]. Such labeling conforms to the “silence syndrome” of immigrant artists, who are unable, at least for some time, to perform their art (two of the greatest Hebrew poets, Hayim Nahman Bialik and Shaul Tchernichovsky, have experienced this personally). Other scholars, on the other hand, have acknowledged the benefits of migration for broadening the horizons [5], whether from a religious [8], lingual [7] or literary point of view [12, 17]. These advantages compensate, in a way, for the migrant’s loss of a homeland. Scholars of both approaches, however, have noted the great importance of the mutual influence and dialogue between the immigrant’s culture and the local one [1]. The third ap-

proach is an altogether different one, where the state of the immigrant is treated on a symbolic level, not as actual exile but rather as an analogy to the artist's existence [16], to literary imaginativeness [15], or to conditions of text and writing [3, 4]. New studies dealing with the migration of Russian Jews tend to reconsider these three approaches and try to find where, in fact, they intersect [13, 18, 20].

A unique aspect of Jewish migration has to do with the syndrome of "negation of exile", which was characteristic of the Zionist ideology [31]. For the Zionists, it was crucial to shatter the binary mind-set of "homeland vs. exile", thus creating an alternative model, of "homeland vs. destined land" [32]. In each of these two models the word homeland is used in a different light, denoting two opposite directions: While the common concept of exile implies a tearing away from one's roots, within the Zionist scheme, exile is in fact the return to one's origin and source. This is how a whole literature of "homebound exile" came to be.

The dual use of the word homeland explains the paradox within the phrase "pain of homelands" (the phrase itself is taken from Goldberg's poem "Pine", to which I will refer shortly). This phrase defines the migrant's complex relations with two lands: the one he was born in, and the one in which he was reborn after migrating. The pain of homelands, signifying a breaking point in the migrant's sense of identity, receives a variety of artistic expressions both in poetry [22, pp. 57–71], (2) and in prose [28].

An eternal journey to the Land of Israel: The emergence of the term 'bi-rooted'

The poem "Behind the Gate", written by the National Poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, takes this one step further. This poem, published in 1927, has an obvious Zionist context, and was part of the national framework Bialik favored. However, although the poem was originally written for children and carries a picturesque note, on a deep level it raises the problematic side of adapting to a new place. The narrator significantly remains behind the entrance gate to the Land of Israel, a broken key in his hand, and in front of him a locked door. The process of migration has not reached its end and has thus failed. To use Victor Turner's terms, the narrator is deadlocked in the liminal stage of his passage rite in the quest for a new identity [19]. The final lines of the poem, "No answer was heard / And a dove with a boy/ Still knock on the gate" (1)¹, combine a sense of failure and of unrelenting hope, and make it a timeless poem, with the conscious choice of an ongoing present tense.

The "pain of homelands" in Bialik's poem does not stem, then, from an affinity to two homelands at the same time, but rather from the sense of being torn away from both places. Rather than a paradigm of "both here and there", we find

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all English renderings of verses were made by the English translator of this paper, in loose keeping with the rhythm, though not with the rhyming of the original poems.

one of “neither here nor there”. This brings us back to the highly productive term “bi-rooted”, coined by the poet Itamar Yazo-Keszt, himself an immigrant, in his discussion on Hebrew literature [36] and in a poem he wrote by that name. This term provides a profile for a whole generation of artists whose roots had been planted in two worlds: A bi-rooted person is someone who has been uprooted from their soil of growth. Being displaced, such a person tries to adapt to a new environment, making an effort not to fall under. Thus we have, in fact, two sets of roots: the initial ones, no longer holding onto the soil in which they had grown, and the new ones, by which we hope to determine our identity [36, p. 47]. Within this semantic field of soil and roots, the fear of failure and the vagueness of success point out that the very notion of “bi-rootedness” conveys a sense of feebleness rather than fertility. These bi-rooted writers may be planted in two worlds, but in fact they belong to neither one of them.

New Hebrew literature has produced a variety of bi-rooted writers, ranging from East European and West-European (Ashkenazi) Jews to Eastern (Sephardi) Jews. Poets such as Avraham Shlonsky, Nathan Alterman, Lea Goldberg, Rachel Bluwstein, Erez Biton and Amnon Shamosh, all expressed a bi-rooted experience, each in their own special way. Thus a distinct sub-literature emerged, sharing some common poetic outlines. Bi-rooted writers tended to touch on themes such as *self* vs. the *other* and inter-generational tensions. The texts are characterized by a fully figurative spatial construction and a marked formal interest in language. Finally, one finds the tree motif, expressing rootedness, alongside the bird motif, expressing the ephemeral, as two complementary poetic representations enhancing the basic experience of the bi-rooted writers.

Research aim and tasks. Both Bluwstein and Goldberg had “double roots”, in Russia and in the Land of Israel, and this can be clearly seen in a “bi-rooted” mind-set manifest in their poems, which I will examine in this paper. In my analysis I will observe two manifestations of this “bi-rooted pain”: European memories and a yearning for the old homeland on the one hand, and the rejection of adapting to the new homeland on the other.

Research problem: Rachel, Lea and Mother Russia

Before referring separately to each of the two poetesses’ lives and poetic profiles, I wish to clarify my initial choice of Rachel Bluwstein and Lea Goldberg for my study. Both were born in Russia and migrated to Palestine at the age of twenty. The fact that both gave voice to the pain brought on by their emigration from Russia (the courage to express such pain in the midst of the Zionist Aliyah era, with its Aliyah ethos, may be gender-oriented, and would require a separate discussion) – has not prevented them from acquiring a canonical status in classical Hebrew poetry. A further similarity between the two is the fact that both had their vast literary activity cut short by a fatal disease (Rachel died of tuberculosis, Lea Goldberg died of cancer).

Their love for Russian culture, in particular Russian literature, can be traced both in their translation projects and in their own work, whether implicitly or explicitly [11, 24]. A key figure linking between the two was the Russian poetess Anna Akhmatova, particularly in earlier works [11]. Bluwstein and Goldberg, both absorbed in translating Akhmatova's work, were influenced by her, making her a role model for Hebrew poets in the 1940-s and 50-s.

Solitude was a fundamental existential state for Bluwstein and Goldberg alike, having to do with the fact than neither of them ever got married or had children [25]. The poetic expression of this condition is yet another common trait of their work, and motifs such as the close lover [30], barrenness, or the binding of Isaak – *Akedah* [34], are to be seen in many of their poems.

The poetic resemblance between Bluwstein and Goldberg is a formal one as well. It can be seen in the structure of the stanzas, the style of rhyming and even the simplicity and precision in their choice of words. There are obviously points of difference, too, but the biographical and poetic similarity between the two is no doubt strong enough to justify a study of the "pain of homelands" and of the "bi-rooted mind-set" reflected in their poems.

'I am ever unstable': A bi-rooted mind-set in poems by Rachel

Rachel Bluwstein, known by her pen name, Rachel (or Rachel the Poetess), was born in Saratov, Russia, in 1890. From the moment she could read and write, Rachel discovered her love for Russian poetry [10]. At the age of fifteen she wrote her first poems in Russian, and kept on doing so until she moved to Palestine four years later. There and then she resolved that she would write in Hebrew only. Has the Hebrew Language been a shield for her, so to speak, concealing her homesickness?

The poem "Foreign Land" was written in Tel Aviv and published in 1926, after Rachel came to Palestine for the second time (during the years 1913–1919 she stayed in France, and subsequently in Russia). It seems that the narrator in the poem seeks an ideological explanation for her double migration from Russia to Palestine. The simplicity of form and content in the poem enhances the sense of hardship and challenge of living in this destitute country. The repetition of the phrase "just like that" (in Hebrew a single word, "kaha"), an anaphora recurring eight times throughout the poem, echoing the number of its verses, is a formal device voicing the sense of default conduct in the act of migration.

If we take a closer look at the poem, we can see how Rachel adheres to the Zionist scheme of "homeland" vs. "destined land", referring to Russia as foreign land, while Palestine is a homeland (the cold sun and cruel heat are indicative natural features). Yet the helpless roaming, the wandering, and the ending of the poem with the words "just like that, without answers" – do not comply with the Zionist notion of the Land of Israel as a home. This homeland remains out of reach within the poem, and the narrator does not seem to have obtained it at this

stage. The narrator's true home, then, is neither Russia nor Palestine, but rather the very course from Russia to the Land of Israel.

The journey as an eternal entity, and the impossibility of reaching one's destination, are openly reflected in a poem titled "Fate", published in 1928, which echoes Bialik's poem discussed above. In this poem, the narrator depicts her stubborn hand rapping on a locked gate to outright exhaustion: "upon the threshold / dead I shall fall" [29, p. 123]. Is Rachel's self-perception basically a liminal one? What does this mean in terms of the "pain of homelands" she experiences and voices in her poems? Presently we will see that Rachel never in truth uprooted herself from Russia, and therefore could not assimilate in Palestine. In this sense she has left Russia, but Russia never left her.

Rachel's poem "Oh my Land, Mother-land" (1929) introduces a gap between its concrete content and the imagery used to describe it, signifying an identity crisis experienced by the narrator following her migration to Palestine. Published about two years before Rachel's death, the poem strongly emphasizes the issue of migration crisis, and is regarded as a personal-national confession. Here too the land is compared to a mother, and the narrator to a daughter, but now the two archetypal mothers – motherland and "step-motherland" stand together in one poem: "Oh my land, mother-land, / why is your scape so withered and sad? / The thought of a step-motherland / offhandedly comes to mind" [29, p. 84]. The narrator in the poem is experiencing an identity crisis, while the withered landscape of Palestine brings up memories of the European landscapes in which she grew up. The picturesque scenery in the two middle stanzas assumes a touch of anthropomorphism ("youngster pines" and "old-timer oaks"), integrating features of nature within a human landscape. However, the text creates a gap between the local content (the actual scenery in Palestine), and the European imagery it evokes, emphasizing once again Rachel's double roots.

It may be worthwhile to note Shaul Tchernichovsky's poem from 1933, "Oh, my Country! my Homeland!", bearing a close affinity to Rachel's poem in subject and content. Tchernichovsky's poem echoes Rachel's poem, while seeking to trace an authentic scenery of the Land of Israel.

"To my Country", Rachel's well known poem published in 1926, also voices the poetess' inner conflict regarding her homeland. Although written in Tel Aviv, this poem too focuses on the pioneer Land of Israel, in particular on the landscapes of the Sea of Galilee. The poem is saturated with an apologetic tone, combining happiness and sadness in the narrator's relation to her country [33]. The choice of past tense for the entire poem enhances the narrator's sense of helplessness in her complex relationship with the Land of Israel as her only homeland.

The bi-rooted complex has also left its mark on some of Rachel's poems not directly dealing with the topic of motherland. Such is an untitled poem beginning with the words "I am ever unstable" [29], proceeding as an inner dialogue of the narrator with herself and about herself. A conflict between her own unstable feelings, compared to falling leaves of autumn, and her strong connection to

the soil, stands at the center of this poem. For our purpose, the key sentence of the poem, "Only you have I never forsaken / You alone are mine. My mother-soil", conveys the narrator's biological bond with the soil she treads on, while the words "only" and "never" indicate the intensity of her experience. Although there is no explicit reference here to a bi-rooted experience, the same question remains open here too: Is the soil in the poem the soil of Russia? Is it the soil of Palestine? Or perhaps both? The scenery depicted in the text cannot help us resolve this question, since the whole setting of the poem is not a realistic one. Therefore, the unresolved ending of this poem reflects its ambiguity as a whole, which is yet another testimony of Rachel's dual roots and the endless conflict between them.

In short, Rachel never quite overcame her "pain of homelands", and a bi-rooted attitude lives on in her poems, whether in the form of Russian-European memories or in conveying the difficulties of adapting to the reality of Palestine. Since the day she arrived in Palestine, Rachel has indeed avoided using the Russian language, but she never quite separated herself from her Russian past and from her cultural affiliation to her homeland scenery. The poems I have discussed in this paper reflect the tension between Rachel's actual living in Palestine, with her choice to write in Hebrew, and her unending yearning for Russia as a "mother" in her literary consciousness.

**'My roots are in two different landscapes':
A bi-rooted mind-set in poems by Lea Goldberg**

Lea Goldberg's biography has left us contradicting evidence as to her exact birthplace, and it is unclear whether she was born in Prussian Königsberg (present-day Kaliningrad in Russia) or in Lithuanian Kovno (Kaunas). For our purpose, Goldberg's mother had planted in her the love for the Russian language since early childhood, and it is no surprise that on her death bed Goldberg was heard mumbling fragmented Russian sentences [23]. With a remarkable talent for picking up languages, Goldberg wrote down some of her thoughts about polylingualism and the forming of identity in her diary, on January 2, 1928: "We do not have a language", she wrote. "... ever since we were children, we have been spoken to in three, perhaps even four languages. And in neither one of these languages *do we have roots*" (4). We shall come back to this issue shortly. Here we should stress that along with her fluency in the Russian language – "in Russian I do not lack words" (4, p. 117), she wrote in her diary – Goldberg had a marked appreciation for Russian literature [21]. Until the age of fifteen, she wrote poetry in Hebrew and in Russian, and later on Russian literature was central to her academic pursuits [27]. She wrote, among others, on Pushkin, Chekhov and Tolstoy [26].

Goldberg's duality toward Russia as a homeland is widely present in her poems, demonstrating her dialectical approach toward the notions of homeland and exile [6]. Her well known poem opening her song cycle "From the Songs of my Beloved

Land” (1951) leaves much ambiguity as to the country referred to in the text, this indecision being a clear sign of crisis [35]. It is indeed hard to determine whether the narrator in the poem speaks of Lithuania as her homeland (under Russian rule at the time Goldberg was born), or whether it is the Land of Israel she is speaking of, as her spiritual homeland, or rather an abstract country, as a metaphor for love. One thing is clear, though: the scenery in the poem does not suit the reality in Israel, but is rather a depiction of a European climate, as in the line “Seven days of spring-time a year / All the rest are tempest and rain” (3, p. 199). The final lines emphasize once again the narrator’s sense of responsibility toward her homeland, whatever it may be: “From city to city, from land to land / cast out, with a song and a musical box / I’ll recount your glamorous poverty” (3, p. 199).

The frequent use of oxymoron is typical of Goldberg’s poetry, signifying the lack of reconciliation within the very roots of her soul. In “From the Songs of My Beloved Land” the “pain of homelands” is displayed in phrases such as “beggarly land of beauty” or “your glorious poverty”. The location of these self-contradicting phrases at the beginning and ending of the poem leaves a marked impression on the reader, accentuating the gap between reality and wishful dream.

Goldberg’s poem “Pine” (1955) uses different poetic devices which mark her bi-rooted complexity. Due to the litotes in the opening lines of the poem, the reader forms a mental picture, only to be rejected in the following lines. One may ask which one is the main message, and which is the subordinate one: Is the main point of these lines the scene itself, or rather its negation? All in all, the landscapes depicted in the poem, from the pine needles to the cape of snow, give away once again Goldberg’s basic consciousness as a migrant who has yet not found herself a home. The restrictions of the sonnet form, as a choice of genre, also seem to be a cultural residue influencing the phrasing in the poem [9]. The comparison of the writer herself to the pine trees on the one hand and to the “birds of travel” on the other (both central motifs used by bi-rooted writers) reflects the contrast between adaptation and rupture. The highlight of this course of imagery lies in the paradoxical tone enfolded in the phrase near the end of the poem, where the narrator wishes to convey the “pain of two homelands” (4, vol. B, p. 143). This paradoxical phrase emphasizes the immigrant’s existential distress, posing it as the fundamental experience in the poem.

The prospect of assimilation in the new homeland is shattered in Goldberg’s song-cycle titled “A Nameless Journey”, published in 1960, the year beginning the final decade of the poetess’ life. At this stage Goldberg has already gone through a long process of acclimatization in Israel, yet even now she is not quite certain as to where or who she is: “And I am here, wholly here – / in a foreign city / in the heart of a great foreign homeland” (4, vol. C, p. 31).

Goldberg rejects, then, the option of adaptation, and her poems voice a longing for a forsaken homeland and even more strongly, the pain of abandonment. Her poem “From My Old Home” (1940) opens with the words: “From my old home nothing is left / but the memory of a vague desire” (4, vol. A, p. 224). The vague-

ness of this homesickness allows the narrator to feel the pain of exile without betraying her new homeland. In fact, Goldberg had foreseen this pain even before leaving home. In a poem she wrote a fortnight before her departure, a text that would be realized years later, she says: "And if I go away from here to rooms as foreign as a secret / My feet will cry along the way for all the lost and trampled hours" [24, p. 94].

We have seen that the element of indecision, alongside the frequent use of oxymoron and paradox, characterizes the representation of "pain of homelands" in Lea Goldberg's poems. Like Rachel, Goldberg voices her longing for a lost homeland to which she will never return, while hoping to find a new homeland in her exile. Evidence from Goldberg's diaries collates the biographic dimension with the poetic one, reaffirming the significance of this theme in Goldberg's life and work.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested a joint analysis of Rachel Bluwstein and Lea Goldberg, as two poetesses who migrated from Russia to Israel without altogether cutting off their past. This aspect of their lives and work was dealt with in light of the term "bi-rootedness", analyzing several poems in which the "pain of double roots" is present, whether as a central or marginal theme of the text. I have examined the manner in which the two poetesses lived the "pain of homelands" to its full. Both exhibit a bi-fold scheme, rejecting any possibility of adapting to the new homeland, while bringing up European memories and a yearning for the old homeland.

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В СЕРДЦЕ ЧУЖОГО ОТЕЧЕСТВА: ДВОЙСТВЕННОСТЬ САМОИДЕНТИФИКАЦИИ В ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ РАХЕЛЬ БЛЮВШТЕЙН И ЛЕИ ГОЛЬДБЕРГ

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Есть много общего в биографии и творчестве двух выдающихся ивритских поэтесс – Рахели Блювштейн (1890–1931) и Леи Гольдберг (1911–1970). Общим в их творчестве является дуализм, выражающийся в постоянном поэтическом обращении к образам как старой, так и новой родины. И у Рахели Блювштейн и у Леи Гольдберг присутствует двойственность, характерная для иммигрантской литературы, творческий самопоиск на земле Израиля через обращение к взратившей их культуре России. В данной статье рассматривается явление творческого дуализма и связанные с ним трудности творческого и личного поиска, духовная и личная неустроенность, обращение к образам далекой, но чужой родины с одной стороны, и отказ принять реалии так и не ставшей новой родины, с другой.

Ключевые слова: иммигрантская литература, иммиграция, родина, культурный дуализм, Россия, Земля Израиля.