

AN INSIGHT INTO A FEMININE IDENTITY: A READING OF NAVA SEMEL'S FICTION

MADHURA A. S

ASST. PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

DOSR IN ENGLISH

KSOU, MYSORE, INDIA

Abstract

Nava Semel, a second generation holocaust writer throws her inwardness into gender issues and problems of Jews inhabiting across their homeland. This paper examines Nava Semel's fiction to focus on issues of struggle for identity and self of women in the earlier novel and the quest for home in the latter one. The emphasis obviously will be on the period of Holocaust. The author investigates the themes of exploitation of women, marginality, forced marriage, ethos that chokes human liberty to choose love and conspicuous differences that are forced between men and women regarding national missions. This paper projects Semel's contributions that deal with the women issues at a time when the human psyche was under duress because of the terrible shadow of Holocaust and also of the inevitable Jewish movement towards ethnocentric pro-Israelism and Zionism. Semel speaks about the holocaust experience of a victim, a five year old girl, who was hidden during World War II, in a dark pit, under the house of Polish peasants, who gave her shelter for money, in her novel, And the Rat Laughed. Whereas in Paper Bride, Imri the central character, inspired by the holy Zionist mission indulges in adhoc marriage in order to subserve the over-riding ideals of Semitism. A clear feminist view will guide this investigation to bring out patriarchy that is hidden behind a national ideal which however shatters the very basic principle of freedom for women. The attempt in this paper will be able to look at the bare sensitive, timeless issues of trauma and exploitation meted out to women in any given society. Nava Semel's novels will be examined in this light keeping in view the major feminist thoughts that underlay the theoretic contributions of Kate Millet, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir; and GayatriSpivak.

Key words: *Second generation holocaust, Holocaust, EretzIsreal, Zionist mission, Semitism and Zionism.*

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"A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction"

- Virginia Woolf

Nava Semel is a Jewish novelist with a rare psychological insight into the kinds of lives, especially lead by women in a diasporic ethos like the Leopard and the Spot are inextricable. Semel's fiction, *And the Rat Laughed* and *Paper Bride* carry with a strong scent of the trauma of Holocaust. But these new timeless stories set in environs of Poland and Palestine has a fresh new vision and are written from a different perspective. The novels investigate how the Israeli woman encounters the imperishable scars of the past and the concomitants of a patriarchal social order in which the woman is no more a foot-rug. This paper proposes to survey the issues of women during the Holocaust which is well narrated by Nava Semel, a daughter of Holocaust survivor and her writings constantly draw from the Holocaust experience. The paper attempts to demonstrate and concentrate on the Holocaust history neglect women and gender as it is existed even now.

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Since many victims of sexual violence were subsequently murdered on indeterminable dates, this book talks about women helplessness and exploitation during the Holocaust. Nava Semel, the second generation Holocaust writer brings back the traumatic memories of the dark event in the history of Europe where millions of Jews were exterminated by the Nazi Regime. In order to escape from this pogrom, Jews started migrating towards regions away from Europe. Semel is one such writer who represents the second generation of Jews who were privy to the inside story of life in a ghetto and concentration camps.

Nava Semel's novel *And the Rat Laughed* focuses on the survival story of a five year old girl who was hidden during World War II in a dark pit under the house of Polish peasants who did it for money. The novel is constructed by using integrated poetics, crossing each other, unfolding the girl's survival story as a puzzle, thus enabling the reader to discover a rich and complex geology of layers. Furthermore, reading the novel through radical feminist eye enrich the public discourse on issues such as rape and sexual abuse.

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The novel has five kinds of narrative. Part one – “The Story” – is the account of a woman struggling to relay to her grand-daughter the memory of being a Jewish child in hiding during the war. The grand-daughter then attempts to make sense of her grandmother’s difficulties with remembering in part two – “The Legend”. The third section, “The Poems”, is made up of a series of inter-related poems dealing with the grandmother’s traumatic life. Part four – “The Dream”, thrusts time forward to 2099, where the grand-daughter’s notebook is found and read. Part Five, “The Diary”, is a diary account of a priest who came into contact with the grandmother as a child.

While hiding in the pit, the little girl in the novel was abused repeatedly by the son of a farmer who "gave her refuge". The novel begins with the question "How to tell the story?" Since the child that became a grandmother in Tel Aviv is now demanded by her granddaughter to share her life-story, for a school project. The grandmother is torn between two inner conflicting forces. On the one hand, her desire to tell the story in order to perpetuate it is strong. Yet, the need to protect her grand-daughter from the ugly and painful details that might scar her young soul. But there are more difficulties: Grandmother wants to tell the story by using terms in a realistic manner.

The protagonist who has no name in the novel (which makes her an "everywoman" character) realizes that her story is but a "stumps-tail". The reason lies in both difficulties - telling her own experiences that happened at the age of five when she lacked articulated language skills. That makes it impossible for her to use a conventional linear plot. The other difficulty in revealing her repeatedly brutal rape as a helpless child, is the fact that she had never dared even mentioning it to herself through the years. Fragmented sentences and broken narratives are all she can use and these are a challenge to the reader so he can recreate a coherent story, including the horrific sexual abuse, as appearing in the grandmother's consciousness.

The footstep of the farmer’s son was distinct from other sounds that the girl learned to identify. In order to avoid mentioning the horror experienced in the pit, the grandmother uses synecdoche which replaces the hard core description of the event. Even when she recalls the Polish parents' question to their son: "Stephen, what are you looking for down there?" the reader must complete the missing details, and connect the dots of the puzzle in the novel, deciphering the coded language. The following sentences become the testimony by itself, but without mentioning names, dates, and facts:

“Jewish skin, so soft, so smooth.

Don’t you dare open your Jewish mouth, or I’ll kill you.

How could she tell now?

Either way, it will end in death.” (*And the Rat Laughed*, P. 28)

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Five short fragmented sentences can restore in the grandmother's consciousness the entire story of abuse, the use of violence to impose sex, the exploitation of a vulnerable situation, the threat after such a violent act, and the self acceptance of the inability to talk about the horrid experience. In her conversation with her grand-daughter, the grandmother who through the act of storytelling is slowly freed from being an emotional mute, decides to narrate the lewd details, not because she's unaware of the explicit terms. Formal terms to describe the actions of the farmer's son, such as "rape", "sexual abuse", "physical violence", "threats" - are not being pronounced in her testimony to her granddaughter for she needs an entire new emotional vocabulary. The "Explicit Word" will always fail to describe her personal trauma, following years of keeping silent, and burying the events in her own pit.

In the novel, *And the Rat Laughed*, Nava Semel heightens the tension between hiding and discovery, since the child is hidden almost out in the open, in the church and the rectory, instinctively knowing when to melt into the shadows and when to be quiet. Deborah Dwork, a critic, has pointed out the great psychological difficulty for the children: "Children in hiding and hidden were burdened with terrible isolation and deprivation. Their lot was to live as if they were not living, to exist without a trace. She adds that this "Unnatural situation precluded a healthy relationship between hider and hidden, reinforced the prevailing ethos that to be a Jew was despicable and dangerous."

Nava Semel, an internationally acclaimed author from Israel, reached in her novel the highest level of art. She gives the readers an incredibly fascinating story, which grips us to our roots, even long after we finish reading it. This is an amazing literary challenge.

Paper Bride, another novel by Nava Semel also talks about gender issues. Translated from the Hebrew by Sondra Silverstein, *Paper Bride* is an engaging tale set in British Mandate Palestine. Its detailed rendering of that time and place provides additional insight into the overlapping struggle of the era. This paper proposes to examine, how Semel's imagination portrays a dangerously unsheltered life of these characters in the neighbouring countries of Palestine, Poland, Ukraine and in other parts the Europe, living with different cultural, national and political identity. *Paper Bride*, an enchanting novel, captures the life of people living far away from their homeland with something of a diasporic quality of the Holocaust era and position of women in the Yishuv society.

Seen through the eyes of an illiterate twelve-year-old boy, Nava Semel's moving, at times lyrical fiction explores life in the Palestine of the 1930s – a world where a young Jew is prepared to undertake multiple marriages to threaten East European women for patriotic reasons alone. When Imri, the central character of the novel, who is out on a mission for Europe, our attention is drawn to his concept of a wedding, where he says:

"What do I know about women? The mission I've undertaken is more difficult than I imagined. I should not have agreed. For the sake of homeland, they said. After all what did I have to do? It's a trivial matter to say, 'Thou art consecrated unto me by the law of Moses and Israel' and then break the glass.

Later, we get divorced and I never see her again in advance, each of us
relying on the good will of the other."

The book, *Paper Bride* takes a different, more oblique, angle on the Holocaust. The newlyweds in the title are Jewish women from Poland whom the leaders of the Yishuv want to bring to pre-state Palestine through a colonial ploy of British Mandate. The events in a book takes place in 1936, when there were already severe constraints on the number of Jews who could enter the country with official "Certificates". The Jews found a loophole in the British restrictions, says Semel. "They found out that the wife of a Jew living here could come into the country. So one of the characters in the book is recruited to do his patriotic duty and marry four Jewish women from Eastern Europe." The hero in question is a 20- something man named Imri.

Uzik is the actual narrator of the story, who describes a woman in his own words when Anna, Imri's first wife enters into his home along with his brother, Imri. He says to Anna, "We don't want you here. The only reason Imri brought you is because he is a patriot." Here we could see that in the name of a nation how women were treated as lifeless things. According to Uzik, "Beautiful bride complicate things", so he partially welcomes Anna as she was not very beautiful. Uzik is such an attentive observer, he finds out a great deal about love, both spiritual and physical between Anna and Imri in the later part of the novel. Uzik comments on Imri's mission when he prepares to leave for Europe after his second marriage. "You are going to get married again?" asked Uzik. "Aren't two wives enough for you? Do you have to write a third wife's name in your passport? You will be famous all over the world." This shows that even this small young boy was not happy with the Zionist mission. He thinks that his brother is cheating and exploiting women in the name of marriage.

The introductory passage of the book describes Uzik's thoughts many years down the line: "I won't live forever. That thought, which seemed so obvious, struck me sharply when I tried to make a movie for the first time," writes Uzik. "I tried to correct the flawed, cruel landscape reflected in the lens. A ridiculous attempt to compensate for small injustices, but even so, I couldn't give it up."

The book broke a conspiracy of silence of sixty years. The story of fictitious marriage was kept in the dark until Nava Semel came and exposed this extraordinary phenomenon through a tragic romantic triangle. This is the story of a man, Imri who took upon himself the national mission Jewish agency to make a series trips to Europe in order to marry four young Jewish women, regardless of any feelings. Complications occur when he falls in love with his first wife, Anna, and the second wife refuses to grant him a divorce. As with most good young adult fiction, the suspenseful plot weaves back and forth and involves secret knowledge.

Imri, the central character and hero of this novel is out on a mission to marry four women just to technically get them into wedlock and bring them back to Isreal. Though there was a good intention behind Zionist mission, there was no respect towards women feelings and innocence. Instead, they were treated as 'objects' to bring them back to their homeland. Later, they had to live a life of divorcees for not committing any mistakes. For the leaders of the

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Yishuv, nation was an over-riding ideal, they wanted nation of their own so they just don't care for the temperaments of women. There was no choice for Women to express their opinions about their weddings. Semel, the second generation holocaust writer portrays wonderfully the hidden feelings of east-European women and their struggle for independence in the patriarchal social setting both in the Holocaust and the Post-holocaust era.

The story evolves in a small moshav in the South of the country. There are all sorts of colorful characters. Its also very interesting when Aharonchik, the village butcher, a staunch Bolshveik and a romantic, talks about women with Zionka about the miracles of communism, predicting a great future in the egalitarian society to come, he says "when it would not matter whether a person was a Jew or a woman, because only the bourgeoisie consider a woman to be a means of production."

"Dark clouds were gathering over Europe at that time – 1936 to 1938," Semel explains, "and this was a good way of saving the Jews and getting them to the safety of Palestine. These 'paper brides' were not included in the British quota for Jews." In *Paper Bride*, Semel does a masterly job of recreating the intimate world of the Yishuv. The story evolves in a small moshav in the South of the country. Woman of a pure conscience, Semel describes how women are reduced to the paper brides during 1932, at Palestine under British mandate in this novel. We could also find a cruel, harsh and manipulated social order in the world of the Yishuv.

The climax of both the novels is very interesting. When both the brides, Anna and Tonka Greenbaum stood face to face in a village, they realize that "Two brides with the same groom and the groom himself wasn't there to choose. But Tonka publicly announced that Imri was hers, that she never intended to divorce him. She was not the second bride but the last and only one." Both of them realize that they are the victims of the "Zionist mission" and "fictitious marriage". Tonka, Imri's second wife's words are very heart-rending and describe the plight of the women in Palestine during 1930's, when she says, "Not everyone is suited to Palestine and Palestine is not suited to everyone." At her best, Semel conveys a picture of Mandate Palestine that is affectionate and humorous.

To conclude my paper, I have tried to outline a framework to examine the lives of Jewish women in Poland and Palestine during and after the Holocaust, how multiple forms of violence coalesce in their everyday lives, and how these become internalized and normalized so as to become invisible and "natural." Being a sensitive and a woman of a pure conscience, Nava Semel portrayed the miserable conditions of women in both the novels. In the first novel, *And the Rat Laughed*, she has done a masterly job of picking up each delicate piece back into its place in the puzzle and recreating a shattered world of women during the holocaust. These unique qualities make *And the Rat Laughed* a rare feminist master-piece. In the latter novel, *Paper Bride*, I can also say that there is no novel which profoundly reduced a woman into a 'Paper Bride' like in this novel. I argue that an examination of multiple forms of violence in the lives of women in Poland during the holocaust and the violence of emotions in the name of Zionsit mission in Palestine in 1930's are mostly non-indigenous, exposes the deep and broad

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manifestations of living in a society engulfed in violence, depicting the "long arm of violence." In both the novels, women have no voice to speak out and show their resistance against the patriarchal social settings; instead they had to bury their feelings deeply in their heart. Both ways women were exploited because of their race and gender in their own social set up.

End notes

Holocaust: The mass murder of Jews under the German Nazi regime during the period 1941–45.

Bat-Mitzvah: An important Jewish occasion marking a girl coming into womanhood.

Bourgeois: Belonging to or characteristic of the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes.

Diaspora: The dispersion of the people from their original homeland. Here, The body of Jews or Jewish communities outside Palestine or modern Israel.

Egalitarianism: Believing in or based on the principle that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.

Yishuv: The Jewish community or settlement in Palestine during the 19th century and until the formation of the state of Israel in 1948.

Moshav: In Israel, a cooperative community of farmers.

Sabra: A Jew born in Israel (or before 1948 in Palestine)

Zionism: A movement that sought and achieved the founding of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. This led to political controversy in the guise of clashes between Jews and Palestines.

Eretz-Israel: Hebrew word for 'Land of Israel', covering the territory, which was part of the Jewish Kingdom(s), i.e., Palestine and part of today's Jordan.

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