

CAN A WOMAN DO IT? ON THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND A SENSE OF BELONGING IN THE NOVEL *AIR-ROOTS* BY RUTH ALMOG

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SUMMARY: This article deals with the novel *AIR-ROOTS* by Ruth Almog, which was published in Israel in 1987. This novel is distinguished from Almog's previous work in its attempt to tackle new themes. For the first time, Almog portrays a feminine character who is a political activist; through her the author deals with the political-social-ideological questions related to the state of Israel.

Mira Gutman, the heroine, grew-up in one of the first Jewish settlements. Her father dedicated himself to serve the country and left her with a mentally ill, suicidal mother. The story shows Mira's search for identity and a place in the world as a woman and an Israeli.

The end of the novel implies that Mira would be able to find her identity and place in the world, only when she would return to Israel and renew her attempt to write her great-grandfather's story. Through researching his life and opinions she would also find a way to involve herself in the crucial political problem of Israel: the Jewish-Palestinian conflict.

In conclusion, the novel presents a woman who wants to be heard regarding the "big" issues, but she needs the help of a man (her great-grandfather) to do so.

KEYWORDS: Literature, Israeli, Identity.

Ruth Almog is an Israeli writer who was born in Petach-Tikva, in 1936. Her first story was printed in 1967. By 1987 she had published four novels and two short-stories collections. Thus, when R. Almog wrote the novel *Shorshey-*

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Avir (*Air-Roots*), she was already a well established author. Therefore, we tend to examine this novel in comparison to her previous work.

Air-Roots present a similarity to and continuation of the poetic characteristics of Almog's previous works, but it carries one new and different aspect.

Dealing with the private inner world of a feminine heroine, a world that includes family, love or even a particular fantasy, is one of the main characteristics of Almog's work. The women characters are longing for love. It is a romantic yearning that will never be realized, either because its object is unavailable, a product of their imagination, or because the woman herself has difficulties to establish relationships. Those difficulties are, in many cases, a result of sickness, real, imagined or mental (see for example the novel *The Stranger and the Foe* and the story collection *Women*).

Oedipal relations with a fatherly figure, admired but oppressive or neglecting, is another repeating pattern (for instance, *Artistic Amendment*, *Marta My Love For Ever*). In many stories the male characters function solely as the objects of the women's desires (SHIRAV, 1998, p. 198).

These poetic characteristics are present also in the novel I am discussing here, *Air-Roots*. The innovation of this novel is the attempt to carry the feminine voice into the public domain, that is, the political-social-ideological arena. Indeed, most of the critics refer to the question of the bond between Mira, the protagonist of the novel, and the land of Israel (amongst them are SIMANTOV, 1988; OREN, 1988/9, p. 7-8 and FOX, 1989).

Moreover, the name of the novel indicates the existence of that bond. In an interview Ruth Almog gave to Anat Levit (LEVIT, 1987), she said that the title of the novel represents the ambivalent relationships between the poetic personages and the country of Israel. The air-roots therefore symbolize both the strong emotional connection to the country, and the critical attitude towards its political situation. The roots which are planted, usually, deep in the ground, represent the first aspect. But being a kind of roots hanging in the air, at the same time they contradict the representation of that profound bond.

Dealing with the issue of the new Jewish settlement in Israel, the Zionism and political involvement in general, is therefore a unique characteristic of this novel that distinguishes it from the other works by Ruth Almog.

Most critics mention the fact that her father left her when she was a fairly young child, as the source of Mira's problems. The father's abandonment creates a kind of wound that will never be healed (NETZER, 1989, p. 61). It is also the cause for harming her feminine identity (SHIRAV, 1998, p. 203). And it is the force that drives Mira to look for substitute fatherly figures in her lovers (FOX, 1989), and an explanation to the political rebellion she takes part in. This rebellion hides a death-wish or a wish for self destruction (HIRSHFELD, 1988).

After her mother cut her hair that was swarming with lice, Mira runs away and finds refuge in the cave where Mr. Skalom resides. This choice reveals Mira's concealed wish to alienate herself from the social norms and expectations. Mr. Skalom lives in total solitude, outside the village and outside society and, very symbolically, on the other side of the river. What makes him an outsider is his lunacy. Mira, apparently, identifies with that man who is carrying his life detached from any social codes and laws, so when crises hit her she chooses to be with him.

Mr. Skalom is a kind of duplicate of Levdovy, the great-grandfather of Mira, who lived two generations before him. Mr. Skalom then is a mysterious emissary of Levdovy or the living representative of the dead Levdovy in the present time of the plot. The analogy between them is based on several things: the red beard, the shout "skalom";² and, of course, the madness. Another interesting hint we can find in Mr. Skalom's exclamation about Mira's beautiful golden hair: a Russian girl he once knew had the same wonderful hair. He must be referring to the young Russian pilgrim we met at the beginning of the story, who fell in love with Levdovy and married him, thus became Mira's great – grandmother. It is impossible to ignore the identification between Skalom and Levdovy. Therefore, the research about the life, opinions and writings of Levdovy that Mira conducts, is equivalent to her stay in Mr. Skalom's cave. The journey to discover the family past can be interpreted as part of her rebellion, for her interest in her rebellious and eccentric great-grandfather is caused by her identification with him.

² *Skalom* in Hebrew means stoning. Levdovy repeatedly, throughout the story, shouts "skalom" as he calls to punish by stoning all the seductive golden-haired women.

The novel opens with the appearance of Levdovy. His description portrays a crazed man; the crazy par-excellence: his tense and distorted posture; uncombed long hair and beard; staring gaze; neglected clothes; indifference to his open wounds; making sounds and yells addressed to no one. The village people gathered around “the crazy man” (ALMOG, 1987, p. 9) who fell asleep by the synagogue door.

Other aspects of Levdovy’s story are also in accordance with the image of a crazed man: the first is in his prophetic powers that enable him to predict, from the very first days of the arrival of European Jews to the land of Israel, that this land will not be able to carry two peoples and that the hatred between them will grow rapidly and will result in bloodshed.

The second aspect is that of the wanderer: the crazed man is a drifter, who is not attached to any place and wanders from one location to another without a clear plan; he is driven by some kind of urge or he is fleeing from enemies his madness aroused against him.

Levdovy is wandering around, often neglected, injured, almost dried, always on foot, agitated and enraged: from Gedera to Mikve-Israel, to Jerusalem, Zefat, Jaffa and Beirut.

The main reason for this situation is his inability to belong; Levdovy is unable to be a part of the group, any group. That results in hatred and scorn of his peers towards him. They see him as a traitor because he would be friendly with the Arabs and have strange ideas. Levdovy is too weak to work the land and is different also because he is returning to orthodox religious customs that his friends abandoned for good.

Levdovy then does not fit in, not as a man, a comrade nor as a pioneer. He is not fulfilling the social role expected of him.

This social role is a product of the historical and ideological circumstances of the first and second waves of Jewish immigrants to Israel, especially those who came from Russia, like Levdovy. A very strict ethic-code has developed inside this pioneer society, and I will call it the settler’s code. The individual was required to have complete and zealous devotion to a whole set of values including almost all aspects of life: the nature of occupation, spiritual and ideological beliefs and lifestyle. This settler’s code is the fruit of the socio-

cultural life in the land of Israel at the beginning of the 20th century, and its image is reflected in the novel. Regarding Levdovy as a traitor when he fails to fulfill any of the code's demands is a clear proof of its existence. His difference of beliefs, conduct and lifestyle alienates him to his social role. Such alienation is unbearable, and drives Levdovy, whose heart is full of doubts and who lacks determination and physical strength, to madness. Levdovy himself admits and relates his madness to his failure to belong, his failure to be one of the group and an active participant in its ways and objectives. Being different, as he sees it, leaves him alone with his dirty corrupted self. He believes that a group of people might find salvation, but not an individual. The lonely outsider could not be saved. His way is a dead-end one; he has no cure, unless he could return to the protective shelter of the group. Since this way is not available to him any more, he loses his mind.

As was mentioned before, Mira's story has the nature of a search of identity. One path of this search takes her on an imaginary journey in the footsteps of her maternal great-grandfather, Levdovy. Mira feels that by following his life-story she might understand her own life. She has an unexplained feeling of closeness to him, in spite of her mother's ridicule. Ruchama, Mira's mother, claims that her daughter resembles much more her father, so there is no point in her resolution to seek answers in her mother's genealogy.

One of the manifestations of Mira's struggle against her father can be seen in her joining a radical leftist group in Europe. Leaving the state of Israel, being activist in anti-Zionist political groups, can really hurt Gutman, Mira's father, who has devoted his life to serve his country. On the other hand, we might explain Mira's political activity as a continuation of her father's path, only in a different arena and with other political objectives.

The references to Marcuse might shed more light on this chapter of the heroine life, that is, her radical political activity. The first mention appears, in fact, when Mira tends to realize her femininity. Whenever Mira's "balance" inclines to her feminine side, she gives-up, withdrawing, from her political activity. That is what happened when she was married to Jack. She is looking for some kind of compensation to the lack of political activity, by reading Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. The reciprocal linkages between the

principle of pleasure and the principle of reality, between civilization and oppression and between Eros and Thanatos, are the essence of the discussion in the book. This discussion can shed light not only on Mira's private inner motives, but also on social phenomena and events, such as the radical anarchistic political actions of young people like Mira.

The reciprocal linkages mentioned above are all linkages of oppression and rebellion: the principle of pleasure starts a mechanism of repression (and therefore – oppression) of sadness, and the principle of reality oppresses the principle of pleasure by putting its pleasant visions to a reality test (FREUD, 1968). Civilization is about oppression and suppression of the instinctive needs and desires, which, in turn, release or oppress each other. That is because the struggle between the two main urges, the Eros and the Thanatos, is an everlasting one: if Eros is a power of preservation of life, then it must oppress the other human unconscious desire – the wish of death and destruction. On the other hand, Marcuse finds that the sadistic components of Eros are powers which serve the Thanatos. Also, the civilization powers are limiting (and thus oppressing) Eros. Those limitations are weakening the desires of life and in doing so they set free the destructive desires (MARCUSE, 1978). In this way, the history of civilization is a cycle of oppression and rebellion that was provoked by the oppression. The rebel forces then establish a new regime, which is carried out by new oppression.

Marcuse's belief that through oppression the civilization can end the oppression and achieve freedom, gives justification to the anarchistic groups that Mira is active in. The anarchistic activity is a kind of rebellion against the patriarchal oppression force that is represented by the authoritative institutions of society. The aim of their destructive rebellion is to bring back freedom.

Those dialectic relations between freedom and oppression; between aspiration to liberation and happiness of “The Lost Garden of Eden” and the necessity to achieve social progress, are seeking their balance in “the principle of nirvana”. The “nirvana” is the place where pleasure and death merge into one. And so, claims Marcuse, the death wish is an unconscious escape from pain and sorrow; it is expression of the eternal struggle against suffering and oppression.

This phrase, in my opinion, provides the way to understand why Mira has joined an anarchist group that endangers the life of its members. It is not only an oedipal rise against her father but a search for happiness in the absence of oppression. This is an existential search. Under this light we can also understand Ruchama's repeated attempts to kill herself; the risk Yan takes when he goes back to Prague at times of war. This is the way to view the political activity of the restless youth at the end of the 60's, in Italy and France, because, as Marcuse shows, the same progression occurs in the individual level and in the social level. Thus, the youngsters fight is not just a fight for political justice or liberation, but it is also an unconscious demonstration of a collective death-wish.

Death is then, at the same time, escape from freedom and escape from oppression. Nirvana, the perfect happiness, is viewed as an absence; absence of sorrow, absence of oppression. This can only be achieved in a situation of total nothingness – in destruction and death. In their actions the anarchists aspire to blow up and demolish the existing social institutes. This aspiration covers the search for complete nothingness, for nirvana. Similarly, castration, which is a light-motif in the novel relating the characters of Mira and Levdoxy, can be interpreted not as a self-inflicted punishment but as a way of liberating oneself from urges, from Eros domination; a step towards the goal of total freedom.

The feminine character that Ruth Almog presents in the novel is complicated, ambivalent and torn in regard to her place as a woman in society. The character of Mira shows that the woman's situation is more than conflictual. This woman is trapped: her aspiration for self-fulfillment and significant life requires a change of social roles, but deep inside her, she is unable to be free of those roles and society's expectations of her as a woman. She experiences them as superior commandments in spite of her political conviction. So Mira's life moves as a pendulum between rebelling against whatever is expected of her as a woman, and radical acceptance of the exact same expectations: the wild, intelligent, dirty and angry child became a girl who feels all she has to offer is her feminine body. As a mature woman, activist and journalist, Mira has completely alienated the sexual aspect from her life. However, when this aspect comes back into her life, she soon falls apart and suffers a mental breakdown. Mira is unable to maintain her strength and identity as a human being whenever she is involved

in a relationship with a man. This shows her inability to reconcile her social consciousness and her private life. There is a gap between her conscious and mental evolvement.

The redemption of Mira's tortured soul will only be possible if and when she would come to terms with her separation from her husband. The detachment of the sexual connection enables the image of Levdovy to break into her mind again and find the long forgotten bond to the scenery of her homeland.

Writing Levdovy's story and the return to the land of Israel and her home village are the beginning of her salvation.

Levdovy, who came to Israel with the first wave of pioneer settlers, arrived with the intention to redeem its land. Mira, almost one hundred years later, would find redemption in the same land. This symbolic connection shed light on the author's aspiration to tell a story that deals with the big questions; a story that breaks the traditional boundaries of female writing which are usually confined to "small", trivial issues. Almog expressed her wishes (in an interview with Lea Fox) to enter the manly territory that deals with historical, social and ideological questions. This wish was realized here, not only by the fact that a female writer is touching those topics, but also by placing a female heroine who is active in the male social-political world. However, this heroine, Mira Gutman, proves, in my opinion, quite the opposite: her attempt to take part in "the principal story" of her time is parallel to her painful failures as a woman, that is, the failures in her love life and intimate relationships. Besides, she needs the figure of Levdovy to carry her on his (manly) back into the heart of the Zionist problem, meaning the dispute about the possibility of Palestinian-Jewish coexistence in the same land.

Mira needs, then, masculine crutches to enable her to walk into the battlefield of the Zionist story.

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