

Only Migrating Birds Know: Immigration and Displacement in Poetry

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Abstract

This article describes and examines poetry expressing themes of uprooting and displacement. Some theories of migration discuss the individual motives and considerations of the immigrant, while others refer to the economic and political aspects of migration from the point of view of the nation-state. One specific type of immigrant is the refugee. The State of Israel, established to resolve the refugee problem of the Jewish people, created a new such problem. Israeli poets who describe such feelings of displacement and destruction from their own point of view often express feelings of guilt and anxiety in their poetry.

The poetry of the refugees and immigrants themselves – Jews, Palestinians, and others – gives poetic expression to the trauma of a lost childhood as well as the pain of departure and longing, the loss of language, the sense of fury, and the desire for revenge. These poems are characterized by lamentations about what has been lost, a catalogue of the losses, an obsessive fixation with the past, and an attempt to revive and reconstruct it in memory. The result is fragmented poetry tinged with a tone of self-irony. The struggle to strike down roots in a new land is described in this poetry not only with bitterness and anger, but also with irony and humor. The article also discusses the refugee narrative among Mizrahi Jews in Israel and how it is manifested in their poetry.

The article focuses on three types of images in the poetry of immigrants: tree images, storm images and bird images.

Among the poets discussed are Mahmoud Darwish, Chaim Guri, Yehuda Amichai, Taha Mohammad Ali, Leah Goldberg, Else Lasker-Schüler, Bertolt Brecht, Mois Benarroch, and Erez Biton.