

HOMES IN POEMS: THE LEGACY OF ALEJANDRA PIZARNIK

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Abstract:

*The great European immigration wave to Argentina took place in the late 19th and early 20th century. This factor had its influence in the literature produced by the immigrants. Displacement and non-belongingness are the central themes in the works of Writers like Alejandra Pizarnik, Juan Gelman, Oswaldo Lamborghini, Nestor Perlongher etc. The paper focuses on Alejandra Pizarnik, a leading voice in the twentieth century Latin American poetry, who was born to Jewish immigrant parents of Russian and Slovak descent. It aims at exploring the politics and poetics of literal and literary exile in some of her selected poems in the collection *Diana's Tree* (1962).*

Keywords: *Exile, Displacement, Dislocation, Identity.*

'Exile' is a vital theme and a practical condition for Argentine Literature. Since its unification as a country, Argentine rulers decided to welcome immigration with the aim of shaping the nation. They encouraged mass immigration and political exile from Europe and the rest of Latin America to enrich the nation and did so with the help of immigrants. This factor had its influence in the political, cultural and literary milieu of this country. Writers also are influenced by this historical reason of immigration. Throughout Argentina's history, writers and political figures have lived and written in exile. Displacement and non-belongingness are the recurrent themes in the works of Writers like Alejandra Pizarnik, Nora Glikman, Juan Gelman, Oswaldo Lamborghini, Nestor Perlongher etc...

The paper focuses on some selected poems in the collection *Diana's Tree* by Alejandra Pizarnik, an outstanding Argentine poet. It is an attempt to interrogate the ways she has created homes in her poems or imaginary homeland in place of geographic one. These imaginary homelands are created out of words and this home made up of words becomes the best space to explore her multiple identities and it makes free flight of imagination possible. It doesn't have any geographical boundaries and takes the poet to different possibilities of culture, language, religion and literary style instead of embracing the country's single identity and thus becomes the best space to express her creativity.

Alejandra Pizarnik is a key figure in the twentieth century Argentine poetry. She was born in Avellaneda, Argentina in 1936 to Jewish immigrants who fled to Argentina in order to escape the rampant persecution in Europe. She had a difficult and insecure childhood with a sense of death and loss. Her Spanish with a European accent became the subject of her inferiority complex. Being the child of immigrants she can't cope up with the linguistic, cultural and religious scenario of her birth place since her 'self' is deeply rooted somewhere in Eastern Europe from where her parents migrated to Argentina. Throughout her life she struggled with an amphetamine addiction and suffered from depression.

She didn't feel at home in her birth place and intense feeling of displacement and dispossession haunts her as a nightmare. Gradually she sought solace in poems and created homes in it. In a letter to her friend, Antonio Beneyto, she described her poems as "small flames for someone who was lost in a strange world" (346).

In 1960 she moved to Paris and got aligned with the fraternity of Latin American writers that included Julio Cortázar and Octavio Paz. She was influenced by their surrealistic techniques and

experimented it in her poems. In 1962, Pizarnik published her fourth collection, *Diana's Tree*, the book that changed and established her poetic voice, and it contained the slimmest verses the poet would ever write. It was translated by Yvette Seigert with an outstanding introduction of Octavio Paz. There are thirty-eight poems in this collection, untitled and numbered which becomes an exploration of her identity in all its complexities as a subject of transculturation.

The title *Diana's Tree* is the literal manifestation of her ontological quest for identity. Octavio Paz states, "Diana's Tree is transparent and it gives no shade. It gives off its own light, brief and glimmering. It is native to the arid lands of America, where the inhospitable climate, the inclement discourses and pontifications, and the general opacity of the sentient species, its neighbours all serve to stimulate through a well-documented phenomenon of compensation, the bioluminescent properties of this plant. It has no roots; its leaves are small, each one covered with four or five lines of a phosphorescent script" (Introduction).

She makes an attempt to compare herself with the *Diana's tree*, a sacred tree which grows in a hostile environment. The poems in the collection are like its leaves covered with a few lines of phosphorescent scripts (Paz Introduction). The tree has no roots may be an indication of her sense of dislocation and identity crisis. The untitled and numbered verse in *Diana's Tree* is a candid expression of her not-belongingness and throws light into the issues of transculturation. Madeleine quotes Pizarnik: "Only the reader can finish the incomplete poems, recover its multiple meanings, add new ones. Finishing here is equivalent to resuscitating to recreating." (96). She left her poems open ended by giving ample possibilities to readers. Octavio Paz says, "Scientists denied the physical existence of *Diana's Tree*. Owing to its extra ordinary transparency very few people can actually see it. Indeed, the preconditions for achieving visual acuity include solitude, concentration and a generally exquisite sensibility." (Introduction). As Paz observed, it can't be perceived by everyone but the readers who have a clear vision can make out from it.

Diana's Tree opens with; "I have made the leap from myself to the dawn, /I have placed my body alongside the light/and sung of the sadness of the born." (3). In the poem it is very difficult to separate the speaker from the poet. A continual exploration of the dualism, the distinction between the mind and the body is very much explicit here. Her desire for rootedness cannot be separated from Pizarnik's Jewish heritage and diasporic identity. This unattainability of the signified leads some critics to focus on Pizarnik's poetic quest: the desire for permanence and stability. Just as she seeks to grasp the stable thing-in-itself beneath the arbitrary nets of language, she also seeks a permanent dwelling, a home where she can find rest and stability rather than being compelled to wander.

The third Poem in the collection; "Only thirst / silence / no encounter / beware of me, my love/beware of the silent woman in the desert /of the traveler with an emptied glass/and of her shadow's shadow" (5). This is a portrayal of exile as a form of alienation. She expresses her thirst for love, care, pleasure and belongingness. The feeling of being an outsider haunted her at large. Silence is another dominant image which most often turns to violence and frightens the readers. The space between the lines is an indication of the geographical distance. She proposes a particular form of love which can't be grasped and warns to be beware of her. She compares her with a silent woman in the desert who has much to speak and needs fulfillment of her hidden and disturbed emotions. But her mother tongue is unfit and she doubts its communicative power.

Another poem in the collection; "The beautiful wind-up doll sings to herself, charms/herself, tells herself stuff and stories: a nest made/of stiff thread where I dance and lament myself/at my countless funerals" (15). In this poem, she compares herself with a doll and by narrating it in the third person; she creates a distance between herself and her emotions. Her intense desire for home is expressed here also. It helps us to understand the hidden complex and frightening parts of the poet, such as deliberations of death and feelings of grief. The eleventh poem; "Now / at this innocent hour /the one I used to be sits with me /

along my peripheral vision” (13). This poem speaks about her lost identity that haunts her as a shadow at every moments.

The fourteenth poem; “The poem I don't say, / the one I don't deserve. / The fear of being two / the way a mirror is: / someone asleep in me / eats and drinks from me” (16). Here, She expresses her intense fear of death and can be considered as the most horrible of the collection which shows her dual identity; the conflict between the self and the other. One needs fulfillment in expression but the other doesn't give permission to it.

To conclude Diana's Tree is a crystallization formed by the amalgamation of ardent insomnia and dazzling clarity in a solution of reality subjected to the highest temperature. The product of this alloy contains no trace of lies (Paz Introduction). This observation makes it clear that Diana's Tree is the depiction of her inner self in its truest manner comprising her experience of 'being in exile' and search for identity in all its diversities in spite of her doubt in the communicative power of her mother tongue. Madeline quotes George Steiner who once said that Pizarnik can be placed among the contemporary writers who do not feel at home when using their mother tongue (4). But her perpetual dissatisfaction with language also found expression in her poems. In these ways, she tried to create an imaginary homeland through her poems which gives her a carapace to explore her multifaceted identity.

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