



04

**MAPPING THE CONTOURS OF WILDERNESS IN THE SOCIAL CONTEXT
OF JEFFREY GOLDBERG'S PRISONERS: A MUSLIM AND A JEW ACROSS
THE MIDDLE EAST DIVIDE**

Anlim S. Sha

*Ph. D. Research Scholar
Department of English
PSG College of Arts & Science
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India*

Abstract:

Spatiality is a discourse on the relationship or interconnectedness between literature, sense of place, and spaces terra incognita of the human psyche. Jeffrey Goldberg construes wilderness as an allegory to discuss the moral and political nature of inequality levied upon the dispossessed Palestinians and the "other" who were taken as prisoners. In wilderness spaces, human relationships are formed, and the perpetual conflict between Israelites and Palestinians takes on a spatial dimension. Jeffrey Goldberg's Prisoners is a sharp satire on the on-going conflict between Israelites and Palestinians. The conflict rooted in history takes a 'spatial turn' as the narrative emphasizes the need to critically analyse how human relationships are built in wilderness space. The natural landscape wilderness has existed since the evolution of the world and is a constituent of the natural world. The concept of wilderness is dynamic, wherein its meanings are subjective to culture. The tradition of wilderness metaphor is present in the narratives of green texts, mythic tales, and scriptures. Goldberg's use of the wilderness landscape, symbolized through a prison constructed in the wilderness is an irony of the established nation-state of Israel. The centrality of power is satirized here by the narrator as power shifts from earlier oppressors to Israelites, resulting in the formation of the nation-state.

Keywords: Ben Gurion, Exodus, Inequality, Prison, Spatiality, Wilderness, etc.

• Introduction:

Environmentalists and philosophers have pondered the disparity between the natural world and the constructed or social world since the dawn of civilization. Etymologists say that the notion of wilderness is subjective to the culture and conventions of a period as social changes implicate its linguistic usage. The dynamics of wilderness, as well as its cultural and philosophical ties, transcend naturalist concerns. Above all, to transcendentalists, like Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Thoreau, wilderness space is a fertile arena for man to rediscover himself. Furthermore, revered by literary artists, it never fails to leave its impression on sketches of famous painters like Thomas Cole. Landscape paintings serve as the solid axle by which eco-critics distinguish between dyads, civilization, and wilderness. Eco-critic Don Scheese says there is conflict in the discourse embedded in the culture about the contraries of civilization and wilderness. He further charts the contradictions and distinguishes the facets that determine polar dynamism as follows: "Wilderness / Civilization; Nature / Culture; Wildness / Domestication; Re-creation / Recreation; Unconsciousness / Self-consciousness; Biocentrism / Anthropocentrism; Native American Cultures / Euramerican culture; Traditional Environmentalism / Radical Environmentalism; Anti-modernism / Progress" (Scheese, 5). Thus a



tradition of wilderness metaphor as distinguished from Western and Eastern thought is unearthed through reinvestigating narratives of green texts, mythic tales, and scriptures. The effects of a multitude of literary expressions have thus been proven.

Jewish civilization's concept of wilderness originated in Jewish history and ethnicity. Judaist scriptures characterize the wilderness as a home for expatriates and a place of divine revelations. According to Hebrew tradition, God's chosen men are led into the wilderness to build or establish a nation and become Jews. Laura Feldt asserts that the wilderness was a subject of scrutiny in the early studies of the religion of the Semites (Feldt, 1). The Scriptures also mention self-exiled men who fled persecution or temptation in the wilderness. It is retrieved from the Torah that in the Wilderness of Zin, where the slave generation of Israel wandered for forty years, God revealed himself to his people.

The term wilderness of Zin represented in the Bible, is also known as the Desert of Zin. There is a subtle difference in the meanings: the former is from the Bible, and the latter refers to modern Israel. Goldberg assimilates into the text the narrative of the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness and weaves a tale of comparison between the scriptural account and its intertextual reference. The historical context of the biblical narrative is significant as it provides a "communal context for individual experience and narrative" (Walsh, 129). Questioning how the narrator synchronizes the biblical description with a historical event requires vivid clarification.

• **Narration and Intertextuality:**

Goldberg's description of the prison's landscape and his attention to its geographic features commands attention as it is an allusion to the desert wilderness of the Book of Exodus in the Bible. Exodus is the second book in the Pentateuch series. Here, Exodus means a mass movement of people out of bondage. The major theme of the Book is the deliverance of the oppressed. Chapter two of Prisoners has allusions taken from the Book of Exodus in the Bible. The picturesque location of the prison's landscape commands attention as the prison is a metaphor for modern Israel. A critique of the geographical locale and its historic significance led to the conviction that the passage is an allusion to canonical literature, the Torah. The Torah is the set of laws or instructions to be upheld by the Israelites. Critic Danna Nolan Fewell says Exodus is the "foundational tradition for Israel, giving them a point of origin and identity" (Fewell, 14). According to Northrop Frye, "deliverance and redemption" (Redmount, 59) are two archetypal manifestations of the Book of Exodus. Commenting on the conjuncture of Exodus, Professor Christine Hayes says, "The Exodus event became the paradigm of God's . . . concrete, collective and communal salvation from national suffering and oppression particularly in the form of foreign rule and enslavement" (Hayes, 8). Wilderness is culturally significant as it has been embedded in the history and memory of Jews.

• **Racial Segregation in the Wilderness**

Jeffrey Goldberg brings up two metaphors in his book that are relevant to the present, raising environmental awareness; the wilderness and the prison, which is human artifice. Here, the prison constructed in the wilderness is a metaphor for racial segregation. It plays a central role in the othering of both victims and perpetrators of violence. This subverts the idea that wilderness is a space devoid of human existence. As a result of this issue, it is possible to read the narrative as a wilderness of others in a wilderness. The other is a diverse cultural group, the Palestinians. Thus the meaning of the term and its significance are altered to suit the ideology of the oppressors. This echoes Don Scheeses' statement that wilderness is a social construction of the dominant culture.

In his philosophical treatise, Amber N. Slaven argues that wilderness shapes narratives of English national identity, emphasizing the works of Shakespeare and Spenser. Along the same vein, the construction of wilderness also shapes the national identities of Palestinians and Israelites. Even



though Israel is keen on building a state for the Israelites, the conflict with the native Palestinians cannot be overlooked. During the Palestinian Intifada, Israel imprisoned these men to control the uprising and unrest: “The prison held more than six thousand prisoners. . . . The presence of so many notables in the prison had turned this far corner of the desert into a virtual Palestinian parliament” (Goldberg, 23). The violence unleashed is two-fold: a crime against the wild and no less a peccadillo against humanity. The wilderness is forged as a weapon against the Palestinians.

One of the essential aspects of the desert is that it is the place of covenants. In the meantime, the benefactors' obedience determines whether the covenant will be fulfilled. Of the ten laws engraved on the tablets given on Mount Sinai, the most significant is the prohibition of killing. The Hebrew translation of the word murder encompasses a series of meanings, including destructive acts like beating and stabbing. The narrator flings a pungent satire on the segregation of neighbours based on religion. To substantiate the violation of the law, the narrator draws upon the character Yoram: “. . . beat senseless an Arab by the name Abu Firas. . . was beating Abu Firas on the head with the handset of an army radio. The handset weighed five or six pounds, and it was sharp-edged” (Goldberg, 21). The narrator's characterization of Yoram is an allegory of the established modern state of Israel: “Yoram was a religious Jew, and his kippah, knit and multicolored in the style of the modern Orthodox, stayed pinned to his head through his exertions. It was quite a sight – a yeshiva Jew, a God-fearer, delivering a bloody beating” (Goldberg, 21). Goldberg's exegesis reveals the allegorical tone hidden at the core of the conflict.

• **Wilderness: Armour of the Mighty:**

Political environmentalism is another idea central to Goldberg's conception of wilderness. Likewise, the meaning of the term 'wilderness' is highly politicized when defined within the Jewish context. His reference to Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, whose strategy of greening the desert was propelled by a strategic defense theory, deserves scrutiny. Bordering a borderless land for political purposes is a vision of the state-builder. Avraham Avi-Hai, an expert on the political engagement of Ben Gurion, comments as follows: “In his overall strategy and outlook on security, Ben Gurion was greatly influenced by the impelling need for close land settlement. The policy might be formulated as follows: “If we do not get to the borders, the borders will come to us” (Avi-Hai, 126). It is significant to delineate Avi's assertion as Ben Gurion says, “If the state does not get rid of the desert, the desert will get rid of the state . . . wilderness is the natural ally of our enemies, and the greater the wilderness, the greater the danger” (Avi-Hai, 126). The narrator satirizes this strategy of the state-builder as the *causacausarum*: “Almost no one lives in this desert. A few small clans of Bedouins live in ragged camps, and scattering of Jews live in a handful of lonely kibbutzim. The sun pours down on these farmers, turning them as brown as nuts. They struggle against the onslaught of sand, still committed to the vision of David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister, who thought that a green desert would be physical proof of Jewish redemption” (Golberg, 22).

Here, the narrator ironically comments on the good conceived by the indigenous people for the strategist perceived as an altered final cause. The narrator considers Ketziot: “the biggest settlement in the desert” (Goldberg, 23), as an answer to Ben Gurion's political strategy as “the wilderness of Zin, empty in the time of Moses, is, for the state of Israel, a wilderness of armor, crowded with artillery ranges, tank bases and listening posts” (Goldberg, 22). Biblical wilderness is the source material for Goldberg's wilderness as he draws upon the Exodus episode attempting a literary construction of the wilderness.

To conclude, a wilderness of dunes, sand, and wastes, part of the lonely desert without beauty, subjected to conspiracy claims, reverberating with the implications of the ongoing struggle. The conflict cycle with cause and effect as precursors, intertwining history and politics, evokes socio-



cultural factors acting upon each other to remap the concept of wilderness. Throughout Goldberg's narration, centuries of unseen history are brought to life, prominently illustrating the paths that lead to wilderness and its trails. The paper attempts to unearth the hidden mystery of the wilderness of Zin and the mystery of the self-mirrored, mysterious terra incognita to the human eye. Nevertheless, the irony of the bountiful harvest of prisoners is a message that has never been told before.

References

- Avi-Hai, Avraham. *Ben Gurion, State-builder; Principles and Pragmatism, 1948 – 1963*. Wiley, 1974. Print.
- Bernstein, Ellen, editor. *Ecology & the Jewish Spirit: Where Nature and the Sacred Meet*. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000. Print.
- Byerly, Alison. “The uses of Landscapes: The Picturesque Aesthetic and the National Park System.” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, U of Georgia P, 1996, pp. 52-68. Print.
- Comins, Mike. *A Wild Faith: Jewish Ways Into Wilderness, Wilderness Ways Into Judaism*. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007. Print.
- Feldt, Laura, editor. *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature*. Walter de Gruyter, 2012. Print.
- Fewell, Danna Nolan. *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1992. Print.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2004.
- Goldberg, Jeffrey. *Prisoners: A Story of Friendship and Terror*. Vintage Books, 2008. Print.
- Hayes, Christine. “Lecture 8. Exodus: From Egypt to Sinai (Exodus 5-24, 32; Numbers)” *Youtube*, uploaded by YaleCourses, 7 December 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS17dLuTPd0. Web.
- Redmount, Carol A. “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt.” *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, edited by Michael David Coogan. Oxford U P, 2001, pp. 58-89. Print.
- Scheese, Don. *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America*. Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Slaven, N. Amber. *Wilds and Wastes: How Wilderness Shaped Narratives of English National Identity in Spenser and Shakespeare*. 2019. U of Louisiana, PhD dissertation. ProQuest, www.proquest.com/docview/2550278812?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true. Web.
- Walsh, Mary Caswell. *Imagination and Adolescent Trauma: The Role of Imagination in Neurophysiological, Psychological, and Spiritual Healing*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. Print.



This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

To Cite the Article: Sha., Anlim, Ilamaran, P. “Mapping the Contours of Wilderness in the Social Context of Jeffrey Goldberg’s *Prisoners: A Muslim and A Jew Across the Middle East Divide*”. *Literary Cognizance*, III - 4 (March, 2023): 18-21. Web.