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Research Article

Exile to Homeland: Generational Dissonance in S.Y. Agnon's *Only Yesterday*

Mrs. P. Jeffrina[1*], Dr. R. Selvi[2]

[1*]Reg No: 23211204012008, Research Scholar, Department of English and Research Centre, Sarah Tucker College (Autonomouns), Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012, Tamil Nadu, India,
E-mail Id: jeffrinarij2020@gmail.com, Mobile No.: 9894816086
[2]Associate Professor, Department of English and Research centre, Sarah Tucker College (Autonomouns), Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

***Corresponding Author:** Mrs. P. Jeffrina
* E-mail Id: jeffrinarij2020@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex theme of generational dissonance in S.Y. Agnon's seminal novel *Only Yesterday*. It focuses on the ideological, psychological, and existential conflicts found in the character of Isaac Kumer. The story is set during the Second Aliyah in early 20th-century Palestine. The novel follows Isaac's fragmented journey as he struggles to reconcile his inherited traditions with the demands of a modern, secular, and Zionist identity. Alongside this main narrative, Agnon introduces a symbolic fable. It features Balak, a Jerusalem street dog. Balak's journey mirrors and contrasts the human experience. His story adds allegorical depth to the novel.

This study offers a close literary analysis of the text. It examines how Agnon balances realism with allegory and tradition with modernity. The novel is rich with tragic irony. Isaac's crisis reflects a larger generational rupture. It captures the tension within Jewish cultural memory between faith and skepticism, continuity and rupture, exile and homeland. Agnon weaves together historical awareness with deep personal reflection. His novel becomes a powerful meditation on generational alienation and cultural change. *Only Yesterday* transcends its historical setting. It speaks to the timeless struggle of a generation that inherits a broken legacy while searching for a place to belong.

Keywords: Generational dissonance, Jewish cultural memory, Zionist modernity, Exile and homeland.

Generational dissonance refers to the cultural, psychological, and ideological differences that exist between age groups. In today's fast-changing world, these differences have become more pronounced, often leading to misunderstandings, emotional distance, and conflict across families and societies. Sociologist Karl Mannheim explains that a generation is not merely defined by age, but by the social and historical forces that shape individuals during their formative years. As he states, "It is not age itself, but the way in which social and historical forces affect individuals during their formative years, that defines a generation" (*The Problem of Generations*, 304). According to this view, each generation develops unique patterns of thought and behavior influenced by the crises and innovations of its time.

Psychologist Erik Erikson, in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, explores the emotional and psychological tensions between generations. He notes that "conflicts between generations arise when one age group no longer understands the emotional truth of another" (130). This highlights that generational conflict goes beyond differing values it stems from a deep struggle for emotional understanding and acceptance. When worldviews and moral perspectives diverge too greatly, empathy breaks down, leading to alienation. These differences are profound, shaping core aspects of identity, memory, and moral belief. What one generation sees as meaningful, another may dismiss as irrelevant.

In literature, generational dissonance often appears as a clash between parents and children, tradition and change. Writers use these conflicts to explore shifts in belief, social change, and the search for meaning. The

older generation typically values continuity and order, while the younger seeks reform and transformation. This tension, rooted in inheritance versus innovation, reflects deeper cultural struggles and influences the stories societies tell about themselves. Margaret Mead captures this cycle by stating, “Each generation rebels against its parents and makes friends with its grandparents” (*Culture and Commitment*, 27). From classical drama to modern diasporic fiction, writers use generational divides to question identity, memory, and cultural belonging, especially in modernist and postcolonial contexts.

S.Y. Agnon's *Only Yesterday* captures the historical and cultural complexity of early twentieth-century Jewish life in Palestine, particularly during the Second Aliyah. This era, marked by waves of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe, was driven by the dream of building a national homeland. Agnon situates his narrative within this crucial phase of Jewish history, reflecting the hopes, tensions, and contradictions that defined the Yishuv. While the novel is grounded in a specific historical setting, it transcends its temporal boundaries. It speaks to universal concerns such as identity, belonging, cultural conflict, and the inner turmoil of individuals caught between opposing forces. Lionel Trilling observes that modern literature channels this conflict to express broader anxieties: “The young no longer wish to inherit their fathers’ vision; they wish to disown it and create their own” (*The Liberal Imagination*, 156).

The novel presents a society in transition. It reflects the clash between inherited traditions and modern ideologies, between religious faith and secular Zionist activism. At its heart lies a profound dissonance between past and present, between memory and desire, and between exile and the imagined homeland. Agnon’s characters are shaped by these tensions. They are not heroic figures, but ordinary people struggling to find meaning in a rapidly changing world. Their internal conflicts mirror the larger generational divide that haunts the collective consciousness of the Jewish people.

The research scholar observes that generational dissonance in *Only Yesterday* is not merely a social or familial issue. It is a deeper philosophical and spiritual crisis. The younger generation, represented by characters like Isaac Kumer, is burdened by the weight of tradition while being pulled toward new ideologies that promise renewal but often deliver disillusionment. This generational struggle becomes a symbol of the wider rupture within Jewish identity itself a rupture between diaspora memory and nationalist aspiration, between inherited belief and modern skepticism. Set during the idealized era of Zionist settlement, *Only Yesterday* deliberately challenges the heroic myth of national rebirth. Instead of celebrating a triumph, Agnon offers a quiet, ironic, and at times tragic vision. His protagonist, Isaac Kumer, is not a bold pioneer or revolutionary leader. He is an ordinary, passive figure dreamy, indecisive, and deeply alienated. Through Isaac’s story, Agnon exposes the fragility of individual conviction in the face of ideological pressure. His portrayal reveals the emotional and spiritual cost of historical transformation. The novel thus stands as a unique literary testimony not to the fulfillment of Zionist ideals but to the painful ambiguities of a generation caught between longing and loss. Edward Said argues that in postcolonial narratives, generational change often signals rupture, not continuity: “Each generation experiences the burden of inheritance differently, as an estrangement, not a continuation” (*Reflections on Exile*, 138).

Isaac Kumer, far from representing the vigorous Zionist pioneer, is passive, hesitant, and inwardly conflicted. He lacks the determination and clarity that defined the ideal halutz, or pioneer, of the Zionist imagination. Instead, he drifts through life without a firm ideological foundation. He does not fully commit to the labor movement, nor does he find solace in religion or tradition. This mediocrity is not a flaw of character alone but reflects a broader condition a generation torn between two opposing worlds. Isaac’s failure to engage critically with the ideological currents around him makes him a symbolic figure. His confusion and detachment become a mirror of the crisis of his generation. On one side stands the deeply rooted tradition of Eastern European Jewish life, with its strong religious and communal identity. On the other side lies the promise of a secular, national revival in the Land of Israel. Isaac belongs to neither world completely. He cannot return to the past, but he is also unprepared for the demands of the present. Agnon writes:

Isaac walks around in the wasteland of Jaffa. No man on earth, no bird in the sky. Only the sun stands between the sky and earth like a dreadful being that won't bear any other being in its presence. If he isn't burned in the fire, he will dissolve in sweat. Isaac no longer feels his clothes and shoes, for he and they have become one single mass. In the end, even the sense of himself was stripped from him, as if he were removed from himself. (237)

His journey, both literal and emotional, becomes a metaphor for this rupture. He embodies the internal split that many immigrants and intellectuals experienced during the Second Aliyah. While the Zionist project aimed to build a new Jewish identity based on strength, labor, and nationhood, Isaac reveals the hidden struggles of those who carried the burdens of exile, memory, and uncertainty. His story highlights the emotional cost of ideological transformation and the difficulty of finding meaning in a world that no longer offers clear answers. Throughout his journey in his so-called "homeland," Isaac Kumer encounters stark realities that shatter his idealistic expectations. He had arrived in Palestine with dreams of unity, renewal, and spiritual purpose. However, what he finds is a fragmented and disjointed society. The Yishuv, far from being a unified national community, is filled with conflicting ideologies, social tensions, and cultural misunderstandings.

The agricultural communities, which were supposed to embody the Zionist ideal of labor and collective life, often appear poorly organized and even hostile to outsiders. Isaac’s desire to join these collectives is met with indifference or exclusion. The ideal of communal brotherhood gives way to individual ambition and political

factionalism. Even the Hebrew language, which he had revered as a holy tongue, no longer carries its sacred aura. It is spoken casually, sometimes even crudely, in everyday conversation. This mundane use of language symbolizes a deeper loss of the erosion of spiritual meaning in the pursuit of modern nationalism.

In cities like Jaffa and Jerusalem, Isaac observes a society pulled in different directions. Religious orthodoxy exists alongside secular Zionism, but the two rarely communicate. Immigrant poverty and social division further complicate the vision of a unified homeland. Instead of moral clarity, Isaac finds ideological chaos. Instead of national purpose, he encounters personal ambition and institutional failure. His longing for a revitalized Jewish identity a synthesis of past and present is continually frustrated. The institutions that claim to represent renewal are hollow, and the people who preach unity are often divided themselves. What he sees is not a rebirth but a compromise. His vision of the homeland begins to collapse under the weight of reality. Agnon writes:

Isaac walked about in the Land of Israel, among the fields and vineyards of the Children of Israel. The fields make wheat and the vineyards make grapes. Both the field and vineyard are full of Arabs, and the owner of the field or the vineyard or his steward moves among them riding on his animal. He scolds them and jokes with them, and they accept his scolding with love and laugh with him at his jokes, and take a break to pray and to eat, and extend the eating and extend the praying. The Arabs know that the land won't run away from under their feet. Unlike them, Isaac walks about like an idle person and doesn't eat and doesn't rejoice, for the money in his pocket has run out and he doesn't have any work. Things were good for Isaac as long as he was in his hometown. (376)

This widening gap between imagination and experience fuels Isaac's disillusionment. He becomes increasingly alienated, not only from the society around him but from himself. His internal crisis reflects a deeper generational anxiety and the fear that the promised land may not fulfill the promises of the past. Agnon uses Isaac's experience to expose the emotional cost of ideological dreams when they fail to account for human complexity. Isaac Kumer is portrayed as a dreamer, shaped by romantic Zionist ideals and vague hopes of spiritual restoration. He arrives in the Yishuv full of ambition and longing for purpose. Yet these ideals fade quickly when confronted with the complexities of real life in Palestine. The social and ideological landscape of the Yishuv overwhelms him. Rather than rising to meet its challenges, Isaac retreats into passivity.

The narrative emphasizes his obscurity and ineffectiveness. He fails to make a lasting impression on anyone. His actions carry little weight, and his presence leaves no trace in the community. Instead of participating in the heroic labor of building a nation, he drifts into a mundane existence. He becomes a house painter an ordinary worker in a world that once inspired extraordinary dreams. His personal life reflects the same decline. He forms a morally ambiguous relationship with Sonya, which neither fulfills him emotionally nor offers him stability.

Isaac is the embodiment of the modern individual caught between grand ideologies and personal inertia. He is not a man of decisive action but of hesitation and uncertainty. He cannot fully commit to Zionist labor ideals, nor can he return to the safety of traditional religious life. His indecision is not just personal it reflects a wider generational struggle. Like many of his contemporaries, he is searching for a new identity in a world that offers no clear path forward.

His lack of self-confidence and emotional insight deepens this crisis. Isaac is aware of his inner conflict, but he cannot resolve it. He is torn between two worlds one rooted in memory and faith, the other driven by modern ideology and national ambition. This tension defines much of his character. It also speaks to the broader spiritual and cultural dilemma facing a generation caught in transition. As Terry Eagleton explains, "Literature is one of the most subtle forms by which a culture transmits its ideological conflicts" (*Literary Theory*, 189).

Through Isaac, Agnon reveals the psychological cost of ideological transformation. The novel does not glorify the pioneers but instead offers a more painful truth. Many were like Isaac confused, fragile, and unable to fully reconcile their past with the future they were expected to build. Isaac's failure is not a personal flaw alone; it is a symbol of a fractured generation navigating the uncertain path from exile to homeland. Isaac's eventual turn to the religious community of Meah Shearim is not a journey of spiritual renewal. Instead, it leads to deeper disappointment. He seeks refuge in tradition, hoping to find peace and meaning. But even here, he is not truly accepted. The ultra-Orthodox society views him as an outsider. His ideological past and foreign ways make him suspect. He cannot fully belong. Marriage, which might have offered stability or redemption, also fails him. It becomes another hollow gesture an act without fulfillment. Isaac remains spiritually adrift and emotionally detached. His tragic end, dying after being bitten by a dog presumed to be mad, underscores the futility of his search for identity and belonging. The absurdity of his death mirrors the absurdity of his life's journey a man misunderstood by society, and ultimately forgotten. Agnon writes:

The dog's venom penetrated all of Isaac's limbs. His face turned dark, his eyes glazed over like glass, and his tongue swelled up like a shriveled date. A harsh thirst choked and strangled him. If he took some water to drink, he imagined a delegation of small dogs dancing in the water. (And people said that he too started barking like a dog.) In the end, the muscles of his body and the muscles of his face became paralyzed. Finally, his pained soul passed away and he returned his spirit to the God of spirits for whom there is no joke and no frivolity. (640)

Isaac's story reflects the paralysis of a generation caught between two worlds. He is unable to fully inhabit the religious world of the past, yet he is equally lost in the secular, nationalist world of the present. His character represents the inner conflict many experienced during this time of cultural transformation. He drifts between hope and regret, between lofty ideals and personal failures. Agnon presents him as a figure torn between inherited beliefs and emerging ideologies. He cannot resolve the tension between the spiritual and the secular, the private and the political. This unresolved conflict defines his existence. Isaac becomes a tragic symbol of generational dislocation a man who belongs nowhere. He stands at the crossroads of history, not as a hero, but as a quiet casualty of change.

One of the most emotionally and symbolically rich characters in *Only Yesterday* is Balak the Dog. He stands in stark contrast to the human protagonist, Isaac Kumer. Although a non-human character, Balak possesses a deep moral awareness. He has a voice, a conscience, and the ability to reflect. Through his story, Agnon creates a powerful allegory of social rejection, alienation, and existential suffering. Balak's transformation from a stray dog on the streets of Jerusalem to a hunted and misunderstood figure mirrors the isolation experienced by those who are silenced or misjudged by society. He is not merely a background character. He represents the other face of the generation: the neglected, the misinterpreted, and the unfairly condemned.

Agnon writes:

The tale of the dog was not confined solely to the borders of the Land of Israel but began influencing science life and art both within the Land and Outside the Land. And even Hasidism was enriched by its rejection of Balak. We shall not exaggerate if we say that the story of Balak was more significant than most deeds of a lot of people. (489)

While Isaac fades into obscurity, Balak rises as a symbol of resistance and emotional truth. What makes Balak unique is his awareness of his outcast status. He knows he is feared, hated, and labeled "mad," though he has no harm. His descent into madness is not caused by natural aggression or disease. It is the result of relentless rejection and the unbearable pressure of searching for justice in a world that denies him any explanation. His repeated question "Why am I being persecuted for something I did not do?" echoes the novel's deepest concerns. It speaks to the moral confusion and ideological betrayal that define the generational conflict. Unlike Isaac, who is unable to fully express or even grasp his spiritual emptiness, Balak articulates his pain with clarity. His suffering is raw and direct. It comes not from weakness but from insight. Balak's tragedy lies in his misnaming and misidentification. Being called mad shapes his fate. His identity is constructed by the fears and projections of others. Yet, through this imposed identity, he becomes something greater a voice of philosophical protest. He refuses to disappear quietly. In this way, Balak is more than a dog; he becomes a symbolic conscience within the narrative.

His presence challenges the reader to reconsider the boundaries between human and animal, sane and insane, truth and perception. Balak stands at the center of the novel's moral structure. He embodies purity of sorrow, clarity of protest, and the dignity of the misunderstood. In many ways, Balak becomes the true witness to the failure of a generation. His story is not a side note but a central meditation on the cost of being misjudged in a world that no longer listens. The narrative voice in *Only Yesterday* is subtle and complex. It moves between irony and empathy, often shifting tone unexpectedly. While the narrator gives readers access to Isaac's inner world, it also frequently questions or contradicts his thoughts. Rather than offering clear statements, the narrator relies on speculation. This creates a sense of psychological distance between Isaac and the reader. As a result, the reader does not fully identify with Isaac. Instead, he is presented as a symbol of a broader generational confusion. The narrative voice treats him with a mix of sympathy and irony.

At key moments of introspection, such as Isaac's reflections on his affair with Sonya or his guilt about abandoning ideological work, the narrator interrupts. Sardonic comments replace potential self-awareness. These interruptions prevent Isaac's journey from becoming morally straightforward or redemptive. This ambiguity is intentional. Agnon avoids glorifying or condemning his protagonist. Instead, he leaves the conflict open and unresolved. By doing so, he portrays the generational crisis not as a problem to be solved, but as a deep and ongoing struggle. The novel's power lies in this refusal to offer neat conclusions. It mirrors the inner contradictions of a generation torn between memory and modernity, faith and doubt, tradition and change.

Balak's story parodies the deep human need for identity and belonging. His tragicomic journey is more honest and emotionally intense than Isaac's uncertain intellectual quest. While Isaac hesitates and reflects, Balak acts and suffers. His path allows the novel to explore heavy themes such as alienation, justice, and knowledge through satire and fable.

Balak becomes a strange yet dignified philosopher. Though he is a dog, his thoughts and questions carry profound meaning. He seeks truth in a society that has already judged him unfairly. His repeated efforts to be understood highlight the cruelty of arbitrary labels and social rejection. By using a fable, Agnon expands the scope of his narrative technique. The allegorical structure allows him to critique both religious rigidity and the naïve optimism of Zionist utopianism. Balak's cries for justice are simple but powerful. They expose the harsh reality faced by those who do not fit into dominant systems of belief or identity. Agnon writes, "Darkness covered the land and everything on it is gloomy. But when Balak raised his head, he saw that the world wasn't as dark as it looked from below. The planet of Jupiter shone and Procyon and Sirius, two knightly dogs in the firmament, hastened to Jupiter." (611)

Balak's final failure is not a result of moral weakness. It comes from the absurd nature of the world he inhabits. In this world, suffering has no clear cause and no rational explanation. His fate, though tragic, reveals more truth than Isaac's. Balak becomes a voice of protest a figure who insists on meaning in a society that offers none. His story forces readers to confront the moral blindness of communities that exclude and condemn without understanding. The novel's symbolic weight reaches its peak in the final convergence of Isaac and Balak. In a darkly ironic twist, Balak attacks Isaac a man who once casually labeled him "mad." This act fulfills a prophecy that Isaac himself unknowingly helped to create. The moment marks the collision of two narrative strands: the realistic story of a failed idealist and the fable of a persecuted dog.

This encounter blurs the line between realism and myth. It also merges ideology with absurdity. The tragic death of Isaac is not just a personal end; it becomes a symbolic event. The reports that Isaac "howled like a dog" as he died collapsed the boundary between human and animal, reason and madness, reality and allegory.

This final scene reinforces the novel's central insight. Whether it is the longing for tradition or the embrace of modern ideals, both can lead to confusion when they lack self-awareness and moral clarity. Without reflection, identity becomes fragile, and ideology turns dangerous. Agnon uses this convergence to highlight the tragic cost of unexamined belief. Isaac's death is not just the end of a character it is the failure of a generation's search for meaning. The convergence of man and dog, myth and reality, forces the reader to confront the absurdity of a world where ideals collapse into misunderstanding and violence. Agnon writes,

"The dog disappeared, but his bites indicated that he was alive. Since he had tasted the taste of human flesh, he went on bit-ing. Many were injured by him and many mentioned him with hor-ror. Until the troubles of the great war came and that trouble was forgotten." (640)

Only Yesterday explores the theme of generational dissonance through the tragic irony of Isaac and the philosophical fable of Balak. Together, their stories expose the deep emotional and ideological rift between past and present. The novel challenges simplistic notions of return whether to one's hometown, to traditional faith, or cultural roots. It suggests that generational divides are not easily healed. These conflicts run deeper than politics or belief; they are existential. According to the research scholar, Agnon's narrative portrays a generation caught between inherited memory and an uncertain future. The characters live between exile and nationhood, between faith and secularism. Neither path offers clarity or peace. The novel uses two parallel figures a lost man and a speaking dog to dramatize the confusion and pain of modern life. Isaac, confused and passive, reflects human weakness. Balak, wounded but articulate, becomes a symbol of moral protest. Rather than offering answers, the novel presents a layered, symbolic reflection on the human condition. It shows what happens when ideologies fail, traditions fragment and identity is left suspended between worlds. In doing so, *Only Yesterday* becomes not just a historical novel but a timeless study of what it means to live through collapse with memory behind and meaning yet to come.

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