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Seamus Heaney's Ireland and Mahmoud Darwish's Palestine: A Concomitant Assertion of National Identity

Ishfaq Yattoo

Doctoral Fellow

Department of English
Aligarh Muslim University
Aligarh, India (202002)

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Abstract:

Irish Seamus Heaney and Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish are among the most distinguished poets of the contemporary era. Though spatially, culturally and linguistically distinctive, both are strikingly parallel in terms of the commitment to their cultural and nationalistic ideals. The squeezed Palestinian space, under the Israeli military might and the historically beleaguered nation of Ireland, under the British hegemony, serve as the well-defined platforms on which they situate their poetic idioms. To place their overt poems between the nation-centric realms is the preoccupation, which both of them carry with an unwavering poetic nerve. Heaney brilliantly responds to his legacy to champion the cause of reclaiming and reasserting the lost Irish space under the prolonged English occupation. On the other hand, a Darwish poem is a stringent tool to voice the predicament of his voiceless Palestinians. Heaney has a defined motto, i.e. to frame his Irishness which in turn works as a backing force to blatantly negate the foreign hegemony. Darwish is Palestine, personified.

Thus, the present study will try to expatiate, the two poets' tendencies to carry their national burden within their fine artistry. An attempt will be made to exude their anxiety to reassert and reaffirm the lost national vis a vis cultural space.

Keywords: Nation, Culture, Identity, Assertion, Irishness, Arabism.

Introduction

One of the primary concerns with an anti-colonial debate is the assertion of native national or cultural identity. Given the notorious colonial policy the natives are subjected to diverse constructions, even belittled to the status of an animal. They are supposed to be unexposed to the morals, human values or the cultural ideals. The colonizer underestimates the native subject in every aspect of life hence overshadows the indigenous cultural or national dimensions. The colonized is rather subjected to cultural invasion as well, which according to Chilean writer *Victor Jara*, "is like a leafy tree which prevents [the natives] from seeing [their] own sun, sky and stars. Therefore in order to be able to see the sky above [their] heads, [their] task is to cut

this tree off at the roots.” (Harlow, *Resistance* 74) Thus, the emergent native voices at their best frame out their artistic goal, i.e. to defend and reassert their national and cultural identity.

Seamus Heaney, the most acclaimed contemporary poet of Ireland was born on April 13, 1939, the first of the nine children of Patrick and Margaret Heaney. His study in Queen's University in Belfast for around six years from 1957 was the decisive period in his career to build his poetic taste. Subsequently he turned to be a prolific poet distinguishingly applauded by Robert Lowell as, “the most important Irish poet since Yeats.” (qtd. in *Comprehensive Research and Study Guide: Seamus Heaney*) Heaney's career spreads up to “nineteen poetry collections, nine poetry pamphlets, two books of selected poems, one book-length verse translation, three essay collections, one play and two poetry anthologies.” Heaney got Nobel Prize in 1995 and was exalted by the Nobel Committee with priceless accolades for his “works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past.” (qtd. in *Comprehensive Research And Study Guide: Seamus Heaney* 20)

Mahmoud Darwish, the National Poet of Palestine, Poet Laureate of Palestine was born in the village of al-Birwah, district Western Galilee, Palestine. His father was a rich farmer with eight children and Darwish was the second out of five sons. Drawish is aptly acclaimed by his friend and contemporary, the great Edward Said as, “a brilliant poet certainly the most gifted of his generation in the Arab world.” (qtd. on the back page of *almond blossoms and beyond*) His literary oeuvre comprising around 30 poetry and prose collections has bestowed him a colossal stature unparalleled in the entire world of Palestinian Literature of Resistance. He is also the most translated poet in the modern Arab Poetry. His poetry has been translated into 22 languages.

Background

Since the emergence of Post-colonial studies or Literature of resistance, Literary Art has become a universal phenomenon, not for mere aesthetic sense, but, for the engagement with the nationalist and cultural realms. Generation after generation of writers has been emerging from the colonies with a definite set discourse, i.e. to speak overtly on behalf of the unspoken masses. The colonizer's notorious pride of down-looking the colonized in terms of the national and cultural character or even viewing them sans human dignity, is countered with the same vehemence to boast the national ethos. The negative constructions, in the similar fashion are deconstructed. The Colonizer wriggles with his ominous strategy of binaries which, “represents very efficiently the violent hierarchy on which imperialism is based and which it actively perpetuates.” (Ashcroft et al, *Key Concepts* 19) This marauding tendency is rebounded through the blatant defiance of these conscious minds. Thus, the post-colonial/resistance writers shape a discourse which debunks and deconstructs the hegemonic order and reconstructs the native national and cultural identity. Their role is no less than a statesman, a spokesperson or a revolutionary political fighter. Such

writers shoulder the burden of their nation and work with utter commitment. They rebuild the consciousness of their fellow countrymen in terms of revitalizing their lost spirit and blurred dignity, which as in African context, “many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period...The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.” (Achebe, *Role* 8).

Thus, reassertion of culture is the primary concern with all these writers. The very idea of national consciousness is blend with the cultural ethos of a state. Colonialism is a huge blanket under which the indigenous culture disappears. The colonizer works with his potent tool of cultural infiltration which mars the native ideals. It is the culture, which “in the wake of colonial situation...is doubly deprived of the support of the nation and the state, falls away and dies. The condition for its assistance is therefore national liberation and the Renaissance of the state.” (Fanon, *The Wretched* 197) Hence, the job of cultural revival falls on the shoulders of native intellectuals, especially on the literary artists. These writers work as torchbearers for their nation. In their provocative works, the national ethos is documented which mirrors the collective national psyche.

Therefore, the present study will be a project concerning the same national ideas which Seamus Heaney and Mahmoud Darwish transact throughout their career.

Heaney’s Ireland...

Seamus Heaney, an Irish national and cultural icon stands as an enlightening and mighty figure in the rich Irish literary tradition. His art is the voice of engagement, defiance and an overt resistance against the British national and cultural intrusion in Ireland. His poetry, as avers Helen Vendler, “is an oeuvre of strong social engagement looking steadily and with stunning poetic force at what it means to be a contemporary citizen of Northern Ireland” (*Seamus Heaney* 13)

Heaney’s cultural and national reaffirmation is the central preoccupation in his acclaimed and well written volume, titled *Wintering Out* (1972) The Volume begins with the poem *Traditions* in which the same predominant motif is superbly designed. The poem is an epitome of Heaney’s artistic magnificence owing to its wonderful use of intertextuality to exude the central concern. The poem begins:

“What Ish my nation?
 And sensibly, though so much later
 the wandering Bloom replied,
 “Ireland” said Bloom
 ‘I was born in Ireland’ (Heaney, *Traditions*)

The tone pertains to the height of vehemence in terms of affirming one’s own nationality. These lines corroborate intensely, the idea of Irish nationalism and counter the plethora of foreign intervention. Heaney borrows the blunt reply from his own native tradition, his predecessor James Joyce. This marvellous artistic effect is

complimentary to the motif, i.e. the affirmation of blurred nationality under British occupation. Another poem from the same volume with a staggering reclaim of cultural and linguistic identity is *Wool Trade*. This poem is wrought with the tone of nostalgia. The linguistic acculturation is one of the prime issues concerning the Poet. The Poet says:

The wool trade' –the phrase
Rambled warm as a fleece
Out of his hoard.
To shear, to bale and bleach and card
Unwound from the spools
Of his vowels
And square-set men in tunics
Who plied soft names like Bruges
In their talk, merchants
Back from the Netherlands (Heaney, *Wintering Out*)

The above lines pertain to the damage caused to Irish economy and quite brilliantly frame out the deprecating effect of the colonial occupation on the native tongue. The merchants besides exhibiting their worst economic blockade also give a notion of the tremendous foreign impact over native cultural and linguistic identity. The mention of words like 'vowels', 'soft names', 'talk' all clue towards the writers reassertion of his national, cultural and linguistic identity. Thus, the above lines provide a sense of the rich Irish indigenous linguistic vis a vis cultural ideals, hence the effect is intense wrought with nostalgia. Heaney is nostalgic for his Gaelic cultural tradition. Elmer Andrews weighs the same formulation in his own critical manner, as, "the loose and flowing paratactic style...expresses the romantic notion of Gaelic intractability to the requirements of 'civilization', a notion which fuelled the traditional ideology of Irish cultural nationalism." (Andrews, *The Poetry* 58)

Therefore, Heaney bursts out his ache endorsed with his baffled nation which through the foreign subterfuge has been devastated in every aspect of life. The ruinous colonial attitude giving vent to its animal instincts drains the natives by, "replacing a pleasurable, easy-going warmth with authoritarian stiffness...freedom with coercion, the organic community with violence and alienation. Most conspicuous of all is the much-lamented loss of the Gaelic language." (Andrews, 59) One of the incredible poems featuring in same merit of cultural reassertion is *Midnight* from *Wintering Out* (1972). The poem is a blend of two separate realms, both examining the wretched state of Ireland under English imperialism. It laments the loss of Irish natural resources and culminates with the Poet's concern for his nation's cultural denigration. Again, the nostalgia for native language is the predominant issue with the poet which he explicitly declares at the end, as:

That glisten and scut.
Nothing is panting, lolling,
Vapouring. The tongue's

Leashed in my throat. (Heaney, *Wintering Out*)

The imagery of ‘tongue’s leashed’ replicates the entire phenomenon in which the Irish indigenous standards have been stormed by the foreign influence. The colonizer has succeeded in his bogus ideology of reinforcing his own culture on the alien nation. Heaney gives vent to the collective national agony incurred upon his nation, thus highlights the notorious designs of the hegemonic order. The colonizer is steeped in his idea of dehumanizing the native subject and feeding his own enervating pride. The same is countered utter debunking attitude of the nationalist writers like Heaney. Such writers, resisting the occupation in their own respective contexts, work parallel to the anti-colonial struggle in order to rebuild, reclaim and reassert their native standards, as stated in the foundational text *Resistance Literature* by Barbara Harlow as:

The poems of resistance...participate in a radical critique of what Dorfman has called the “standard, uniform patterns” of culture, patterns, that is, of western ideological domination which are currently disseminated...the resistance poems actively engage in the historical process of struggle against the cultural oppression of imperialism, and assert thereby their own polemical historicity. (Harlow 36-37)

Seamus Heaney in the above mentioned poems is preoccupied with the same notion of debunking the foreign intrusion and inflexion in the native, political, economic, social and cultural milieu.

Mahmoud Darwish’s Palestine...

To speak of national identity would be an imperfect enterprise without fetching forth the case of Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian National Poet. A Darwish poem is a document, an open statement and a declaration of Palestinian nationality which still is blurring every other day under the oblivious and illegitimate Israeli state. This may never be an exaggeration that Palestine runs like blood in his veins. His poem stringently belongs to Palestine. He is an individual crying for a collective loss, as fittingly stated in *Exile’s Poet: Critical Essays*, as:

Mahmoud Darwish is the poet of Palestinian identity par excellence. I am speaking here both of the personal identity of the poet and of the collective identity of all Palestinians. The personal identity is rooted in the collective one, the latter being reinforced by the common plight and the common struggle people share. (Nassar and Rahman, *Exile’s Poet* viii)

Darwish belongs to a generation of the Palestinian resistance writers whose programmatic, well-defined and well-organized motto is endorsed with their exhausted nation. They have a common goal, i.e. to let their nation, ‘to be’. The Israeli hardening stance of derailing the natives from their existence falls to shambles under the unflinching assertion of these vehement voices. They are bent with their mission to, “consider it necessary to wrest [the] expropriated historicity back, appropriate it for themselves in order to reconstruct a new world-historical order.” (Harlow, *Resistance* 33) Thus, their art is counter-offensive against the hegemonic

ideology of the foreign vis a vis the alien intruder. Mahmoud Darwish is the supreme artistic entity with the same felt motto rather his voice becomes a paradigm for a national poem across cultures. His poetic imagination is tied with the collective trauma of his nation which he carries within his verse with an utmost devotion. The nation otherwise decimated, enlivens his nation in his work, as Khalid Mattawa points out, "Darwish attempts to address the travails of the individual Palestinian and offers appropriate metaphors and personae to serve as symbolic representations of transformation and empowerment." (*The Poet's Art*, 39)

Therefore, Darwish plays a peer's role to relieve his nation from a strain which having perpetually arrested the collective psyche.

The inaugural stroke in Darwish's assertion is the poem called *Identity Card* wrought with a bold and blunt tone. The poem is a splendid piece of Darwish's signature style — an epitome of vehemence, infuriated Israelis, triggered their wrath, but in turn invigorated the numb spirit of Palestinians. The poem published in the volume *Olive Leaves* (1964), "became a battle cry throughout the Arab world, and the poem became an anthem expressing Arab national pride and even chauvinism, as opposed to the defiance of subjugation and racism that the poet had meant it to be." (Mattawa, *The Poet's Art* 8)

At the very outset Darwish sets his blatant tone to defy the blurry collective Palestinian identity:

Write down! I am an Arab
And my Identity Card number is fifty thousand
I have eight children
And the ninth will come after summer
Will you be angry? (Darwish, *Identity Card*)

The poet's overt assertion is a stunning response to the infamous attitude of the colonial force to project the natives into a besmirched image. The natives are belittled even to the level of dehumanization. The colonizer's nauseating ideology is a garb under which the native is considered the subject sans any cultural or civilizational values, hence needs to be refined accordingly. This attitude rather a discourse is only a kind of defensive mechanism to work out the ulterior motives. The only objective "is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish system of administration and instruction." (Bhabha, eds. Francis 194-211) Under the same hazy picture Darwish's fellow countrymen are casted. Israelis endorse the Arab identity with every kind of negative attributes. For them, the Palestinians are the hapless fellows having no dignity or any rights to exist on their own ancestral land hence they are subjected to their inhuman conduct. Darwish in turn quite vigorously defies his collective Arabism, as, "the Jews call the Palestinian an Arab, and so I shouted in my torturer's face 'Write it down, I am an Arab!' Does it make sense then for me to stand before a

hundred million Arabs saying ‘I am an Arab’? I’ll not read the poem.” (Mattawa, *The Poet’s Art* 11-12)

In the proceeding lines, the poet furthers his argument by a cherishing attitude for his indigenous excellence. He is inclined to negate and undermine the foreign intervention. He deflates the colonizer’s pride and overwhelmingly affirms his own native resourcefulness. The poet says:

I have eight children
 I get them bread
 Garments and books
 From the rocks..
 I do not supplicate charity at your doors
 Nor do I belittle myself at the footsteps of your chamber
 So will you be angry? (Darwish, *Identity card*)

In these lines, the poet’s persona addresses the Israeli that he will not feed himself and his children on his mercy rather he will cherish his own identity and individuality. This is the collective concern the poet exudes in front of the occupier. He asserts his national identity and counters the hegemonic perversion.

Therefore, this tremendous and highly written-about poem takes the reader into an artistic bewilderment. This superb attempt wrought with precision remains unparalleled in the entire genre of resistance literature. The poem is knotted with the Palestinian national concern, as unhesitatingly acclaims Edward Said, “if there is anything written by a Palestinian that can be called a national poem, it would have to be Mahmoud Darwish’s short work *Bitaqat hawiya*.” (Said, *Question* 155)

Another striking attempt of Darwish concerning the national ethos is titled, as *Passport*. The poem is an epitome of identity crisis. The poet in a distressed tone complains for the colonial assault on the native identity. The poet asserts his unshakable bond with the Land of Palestine. The collective Palestinian ethos is tied with the memories of this Land. The poet says:

They did not recognize me in the shadows
 That suck away my colour in this passport
 [...] the trees recognize me
 All the birds followed my palm
 To the door of the distant airport
 All the wheatfields
 [...] were with me,
 But they dropped them from my passport
 Stripped of my name and identity?
 On soil I nourished with my own hands? (Darwish, *Passport*)

Every surrounding object on the land is a sign of Palestinian existence. The land belongs to them, the memories are carved on their collective consciousness hence the external forces have no say to intervene. The environment, the nature, every whiff of wind smells Palestine on this despoiled land. Darwish defies the illicit charge on the native identity. The 'trees', 'birds' and 'wheatfields' favour his Palestinian existence, but the foreign regime undermined all such appeals and besides annihilating the land and resources, also assailed Palestinian, cultural and national identity.

Darwish in his typical style ends the poem by projecting the cognizance of the Palestinian identity with their live consciousness:

All the hearts of the people are my identity
So take away my passport! (Darwish, *Passport*)

Thus, the poem exhibits the unwavering connection of Palestinians with their land. It narrates the authenticity of the existence of beleaguered Palestinian people on their land and their fading cultural and linguistic identity. This poem is an instance of the poet's belief pertaining to, "a link between poetry and community and because the poet belongs in some way to this community and is the product of particular historic configuration, has a role in shaping the cultural identity of his people." (Nassar and Rahman, *Exile's Poet* 108)

Consequently, both the above poems deal with the central motif, i.e. the assertion of cultural and national identity. The poet stands with his people and documents the collective trauma to which they are subjected under the Israeli incursion. Darwish counters the Israeli onslaught on the native existence with his poignant verse. The overriding impact of the occupier is defied equally with the potency of his art.

Conclusion

Therefore, Seamus Heaney and Mahmoud Darwish are the two pioneers of the literature of defiance. Both writers perpetually act as the cultural and national emissaries for their respective countries. They situate their idiom with the nationalistic milieu in order to frame out the identity crisis which otherwise have squeezed the existence of their countries. The study tried to examine the artistic node of the two writers in terms of their literary engagement with the predicament of their nations. Heaney remains loyal to his tradition in enriching his own cultural standards. He is never satisfied with the foreign models rather, he "live[s] of another hump as well" and defends the British cultural infiltration. Darwish on the other hand, profoundly and in a scintillating artistic manner responds to the brutish Israeli regime under which the Palestinian national space is marooned. His imagination is snugly weaved with his national ideals sans any possibility to sever the ties with — his Palestine.

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