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Resistance and Nationalism in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish

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Abstract:

Mahmoud Darwish is Palestine's most eminent poet and his works have gained wide recognition throughout the Arab-speaking world. His poems are dramatic and realistic portrayals of an intense life within a war zone. As a poet of Palestinian pain, his works are diverse and politically motivated, evoking a history of a political and religious struggle against forgetfulness, exile and uprootedness, and searching for freedom and an identity. Darwish is often remembered for being the Palestinian national poet who played a key role in articulating Palestinian identity and the voice of Palestinian people. Yet, the scanty literature on Darwish's poetics reveals that scholars tend to under-emphasize the nationalistic aspect of Darwish's poetry and wrongly assume that his poetics are first and foremost concerned with humanist and universalist assumptions. He became the voice of the suffering, of the lost land, of those waiting for peace and reconciliation. He managed to give expression in words to this land, beyond countries and peoples.

Keywords: history, collective memory, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, identity

Darwish's poetry is a penetration into the heart of a history that is known by its agony, sorrow, and desperation. The struggle against forgetfulness is a dominant and profound theme in Darwish's major works through which the poet attempts to rewrite the history of his homeland, a history seemingly forgotten and a land wiped off the maps. In many of his poems, Darwish depicts the status of stability and peace that Palestinians enjoyed before the Israeli invasion and recalls the early days of glory, happiness, and harmony. The poet uses nature as a symbol and a reference to show the peacefulness that characterizes the atmosphere of his homeland before the arrival of the invaders. Capturing the Palestinian consciousness and collective memory in *Rubaiyat*, for instance, Darwish recalls the glorious past exclaiming at the beauty of his homeland: "You are so green my land, So green o my soul land" (Darwish 64). By referring to the greenness of his homeland, the poet contemplates the peacefulness, animation, and brightness Palestinians enjoyed in the past, which stands in opposition to the relentless oppression they endure in the present. In *Kind Hearted Villagers*, the poet resorts to nature again to reveal the simplicity and splendour of the Palestinians' life in the olden days. He portrays the mildness of the early days and describes how the flowers indicate stability in opposition with the colonizer's

ships that ruined the green land and made it quiver: “When the ships came from the sea, this place was held together only by flowers” (Darwish 23). Elsewhere in the same poem, Darwish recalls the early days of his ancestors, their shallow and ordinary practices. He contrasts the simple life his ancestors led with the sophisticated and merciless life Palestinians now lead. He states: “We were feeding our cows in their enclosures and Organizing our days in the closets made by our hands, we were coaxing the horse and beckoning to the wandering star” (Darwish 62).

In order to assert his struggle against forgetfulness, Darwish further enriches his poem with images from the past, refers to his progenitors and their achievements, and reminds those who claim they are the native inhabitants of the land that every piece of the region is marked by his forefathers' presence and doings. Thus he seems to yearn for the golden and glorious days of the past now replaced by ones of persecution and deprivation. In *The Well*, the poet recalls memories of his ancestors: “I said to memory, Peace be upon you o! grandmothers gossips, Taking us to days of a pure witness under sleep” (Darwish 58). In *The Raven*, Darwish takes a different path to affirm his struggle against forgetfulness and reasserts his claim of the land by stating that he is one of the descendants: “We are the grandchildren of the beginning, We are the descendants of the beginning, We only see the beginning” (Darwish 29). Through this poem, Darwish voices the belief of his people and their infinite conviction that they are the rightful owners of the land and reiterates his desire to struggle against forgetfulness. More importantly, the poet's aim through the depiction of his ancestors is to re-inscribe a long history that has been ignored and eradicated and to re-write the distorted and misrepresented history of his homeland, as he puts it in one of his speeches: “There is nothing more apparent than the Palestinian truth and the Palestinian right. This is our country ... our real not mythical land. This occupation is a foreign occupation” (Handal para. 7). In a similar vein, *Memory for Forgetfulness and Almond Blossoms and Beyond* also mirror the poet's desire to seek the past and search for the golden moments of his innocent childhood on the beaches of Lebanon. In an attempt to revivify the memory of his country and the forgotten boy he used to be, the poet writes:

I always thought the place was identified, By the mothers and the aroma of sage,
No one said to me, This place is called a country, Around the country are borders,
And beyond the borders is another place Called Diaspora and exile for us, I did
not yet need an identity. I did not remember the words to defend the place, from
its removal, from its strange, new name (Behar 5).

Palestinian consciousness and collective memory are recalled in most of his works. Darwish explores memories of his homeland and of his people to reconstitute the land's shattered identity. The reconstruction of the past is dominant in *The Well*, for instance, where the poet asserts: “One cloudy day I pass by an old well May be it fills with heaven May be it fills with past meaning And the parable the old shepherds told” (Darwish 57). It is worth noting here that if Darwish allows the erasure of memory in his poem, *Why Have Left the Horse Alone?* he is

referring to the forgetfulness of the defeated in the poem, for the poet believes that "the battle for memory is often no less important than the battle on the ground" (Behar 1). Clearly, Darwish is alluding to the past through the well as an emblem that embodies the land's religious history and a reference to the story of Joseph, who was thrown by his envious brothers into the well, since Joseph migrated to Palestine circa 1800 B.C. Thus Darwish gives the poem a religious dimension to re-remember the land's fractured identity. Moreover, the poet evokes memories of his forefathers by referring to the fables of the old shepherds and insinuating a link between the symbol of the old well and the parables told. In fact, both of them refer to the past and the ancient times and grant the land its historical and religious identity. In *I See my Ghost Coming from Afar*, the poet also recollects memories of his homeland through the ancient prophets whose divine saga re-inscribes the land's shattered identity. Emphasizing the link between the ancient prophets and the city of Urshalim, Darwish shows how this place is the centre where Muslims, Christians, and Jews cohabited peacefully before the arrival of the Zionist colonizers. In other words, the poet historicizes this religious memory to reconstitute the land's fragmented identity: "I gaze upon the procession of the ancient prophets Climbing bare feet to Urshalim and I ask Will there be a new prophet for this new time" (Darwish 20).

Representing the Palestinian experience in all its facets and delineating their anguish, Darwish should also be viewed as a historian who depicts the baneful history of his people, their pain over the occupation and their grief of dislocation and dispossession as he puts it in *The Owl Night*: "There is here a placeless present perhaps I can candle my life and cry out in the owls night: was this condemned man my father who burdens me with this history" (Darwish 25). As a historian, Darwish recalls the origin of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the establishment of the Jewish state and evokes the human tragedy Palestinians have gone through for the past fifty-four years and continue to endure till now. Depicting Palestinians' chagrin in *Be String Water to My Guitar*, he states: "Time turns around in vain to save my past From a moment that gives birth to the history Of my exile in the others and in myself" (Akash 66). Continuing to play the role of a historian in *Kind-Hearted Villagers*, Darwish expresses his desire to weep over the inhumanity and abasement inflicted upon Palestinians and his desire for an eternal emancipation from the constraints and restrictions imposed upon him and his people. This desire is denoted by the poet's wish to visit Babylon or Damascus as an attempt to escape Israeli curfews. The poet describes Palestine as a metaphor for exile and portrays the grief of dislocation through his poetry. The loss of homeland and the frustration of being under siege are mirrored in *The Earth is Closing on Us*, in which the poet exclaims: "Where should we go after the last frontiers, Where should the birds fly after the last sky".

In addition to acting as a historical record, Darwish's poetry is also a tribute to Palestinians' resistance and desire for freedom since his works are reflective of the communal desire between him and his people to break the chains imposed by the colonizer. Indeed, the poet believes in the power of poetry as a means of resistance and argues that "poetry can resist only

by confirming the attachment to human fragility like a blade of grass growing on a wall while armies march by" (Handal para 12). In *Dreamers Pass from One Sky to Another*, the poet uses words as weapons to fortify the discretion of Palestinians in their strife against occupation and in their desire and hope for freedom. The poet's desire for freedom is indicated through the butterfly as a means of perforating the bonds imposed by the colonizer and evinced through the poet's aspiration to be the butterfly's wings: "Butterfly sister of yourself be what you desire Before and after my nostalgia. Let me be your wing so that my madness might remain fevered Butterfly born of yourself, Don't let others decide my fate, don't abandon me" (Darwish 36).

Deemed to be the spokesperson for his people, Darwish vocalizes their dreams, desire for freedom, and hope for emancipation from the hideous forms of confinement. In *Tatar's Swallow*, the poet's call for freedom is fortified when he asserts: "We believe in our dreams and reject our days We haven't been true owners of our days Since the time of the tatars" (Akash 95). In other poems, Darwish takes another path to enhance his desire for freedom. In *A NonLinguistic Dispute with Imri Al Qays*, the poet requests his people persist in their scuffle against the occupation to attain their freedom. Here, the poet resorts to history to legitimize his strife for freedom and instigates his people to follow Caesar's path in their struggle for it: "Take Caesar's path Through the black smoke that rises from time, Take Caesar's path Alone, alone, alone" (Akash 125).

Darwish's work is also an enunciation of his expatriation and up-rootedness and his poems mirror his grief over the Palestinians' dislocation and displacement. No other poet, accordingly, is capable of portraying the Palestinians' feeling of up-rootedness better than he since the poet's life is a series of migrations. This feeling of deportation entails the status of Palestinians as constant immigrants, ensuring a crisis of identity and a feeling of alienation. In many of his poems, Darwish declaims the loss of the Palestinians' identity and expresses his dream to recuperate it. His poetic strategy to achieve a new identity is by naming Palestine in his poems, ingraining it in the hearts of Palestinians in order to keep it alive in their memory:

I am a product of all the civilizations that have passed through the country-Greek, Roman, Persian, Jewish, Ottoman. Each powerful civilization passed through and left something behind. I am the son of all these fathers but belong to one mother. Does that mean my mother is a whore? My mother is this land that absorbed them all and was both witness and victim (Behar 4).

In *Identity Card*, Darwish again seizes the opportunity to touch on the issue of identity when directing himself to an Israeli government official, and raises his voice to intimidate his interlocutor: "Write down! I am an Arab And the number of my identity card is fifty thousand And eight is the number of my children! And the ninth...will come after the summer, Does this make you angry" (Behar 6).

Darwish has put into words the Palestinians' hope for a normal life, liberation and independence. Throughout his poetry, he expresses strong sentiments about his desire to transgress the borders and pierce the chains imposed on him and his people by the colonizer. Darwish's poetry, in fact, is a reflection of the struggle he encountered while living under the occupation and his works mirror the hatred and anger felt by his people towards the power ruling over his nation. *Victims of a Map* is one of the most expressive poems in which he reveals his desire to transgress the borders and show how: "The earth is closing on us Pushing us through the last passage And we tear off our limbs to pass through" (6). Elsewhere in the same poem, the poet vindicates his desire to move beyond the borders and says: "...hope in liberation, hope in a normal life, hope that his children will go safely to their schools, hope that a pregnant woman will give birth to a living child not a dead child in front of a military checkpoint" (Handal para15). Voicing his desire to evict the invaders of his homeland, Darwish launched a tirade against interlopers: "It is time for you to be gone Live wherever you like, but do not live among us It is time for you to be gone Die wherever you like, but do not die among us For we have work to do in our land" (Sachs 2).

Conclusion

Contrary to the false assumption that humanist and universalist values are at the core of Darwish's poetry, this paper has striven to demonstrate that Darwish's writings intend, first and foremost, to portray Palestinians' struggle against forgetfulness, frustration, desire for freedom and dream of an identity, and repudiate the misrepresentation of the Palestinian people and history. The paper has also argued how Darwish resorts to the past memories and the land's chronicles evokes souvenirs of his childhood and of his ancestors' traditions to fight for the idea that his homeland pertains to Palestinians who are the legitimate owners of the land. There was also a focus on how Darwish's poetics of desire reflect the sorrow and longing he feels for his homeland, his pain over its occupation, and his undying hope for its return to Palestinians. Many of his poems, it has been argued, mirror his frustration over the Palestinian dislocation, dispossession, and up-rootedness, articulate his grief for being under siege and thus being subject to the restrictions and confinements, and enunciate his hope for freedom, independence, and for a land where he and his people would enjoy a dignified life and status.

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