



Poetics of Resistance: A Postcolonial reading of Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry

Sarah Syed Kazmi*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7348-0429>

Abstract

Focusing on Mahmoud Darwish's poetry, this article aims to present his resistance poetry as aesthetic embodiment of oral dissemination rather than purely an art form. We can deduce three roles of Darwish's take on resistance against the backdrop of Palestinian struggle; first is the attempt to subvert patriarchal/colonial ascendancy by subjecting traditional affirmations to critical, postcolonial inquiry; second is the attempt to raise the self-esteem of the people by conferring upon them a 'national sublime' that emerges from their relentless struggle and sacrifice, and; third the presentation of poetic diction that evolves into a self-reflexive domain galvanizing the people into waging the struggle for their rights.

Key words: collective unconscious, discourse, Mahmoud Darwish, Palestine, Postcolonialism, resistance, self-reflexiveness.

Introduction

Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) is a renowned Palestinian poet, known for his prolific works. He published more than thirty books of poetry. The breadth of his works is vast, not circumscribed by the singularity of a territorial or physical plane of existence, pointing to the Palestinian cause alone but forays into the imaginary and ephemeral spaces with an equally artistic dexterity. The poems are

* Sarah Syed Kazmi is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, DHA Suffa University, Karachi. She also heads the English Program and is the Chairperson of the Literary Society as well as Public Speaking Society of the University. C-Email: sarah.kazmi@dsu.edu.pk

Published Online: October 1, 2022.

ISSN (Print): 2520-7024; ISSN (Online): 2520-7032.

<https://reviewhumanrights.com>



interwoven with an eclectic range of documentary and biographical details oscillating between Palestine and other endangered spaces. The biographical element has however been considered with a pinch of salt. Some of the critics believe that many of the spontaneous and passionate outpourings of Darwish have been treated from a relatively nationalistic cynosure; despite the fact that Darwish succumbs to the natural impulse of 'passion' which does not always overtly carry a political manifesto.¹ Since his poems have been sung to the accompaniment of music, turned into anthems by the marginalized segments of the society, Darwish's poetic consciousness has been largely shaped by this 'onus' of responsibility. Thus the kinship between the 'land' and 'beloved', the female figure and the motherland or more precisely between memory and history overshadows his carefree ventures into the liberal zone of artistic imagination.

Review of Literature

The article seeks to deconstruct poems and prose passages by Mahmoud Darwish by subjecting the texts to a postcolonial reading. Darwish vociferously denounces Israel's atrocities not only in Palestine but also in other parts of the world such as in Beirut. Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 has been a subject of his second work of prose titled *Memory of Forgetfulness* published in 1986. The book is a rich repository of protest poems voicing concerns against Israel's attack on Lebanon, vividly highlighting the socio-political repercussions of Israeli aggression against the backdrop of shifting locales i.e., from Palestine to Lebanon. The roaring fighter jets sound like death knell, triggering the creative impulse of Mahmoud Darwish, who is out on the streets of the war-torn Beirut on August 6, 1982. Since Darwish was a witness to the war-ravaged city of Beirut; he embarks on a pensive journey revisiting the roles and responsibilities of the bard subjecting Israeli invasion to a historical and political scrutiny highlighting the kinship between writing and history under the garb of memory and forgetfulness respectively.

A Postcolonial Reading of Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry

The article employs key concepts of postcolonial theory as the methodical approach to the study. Darwish brings together the aesthetics of his metrical composition and the voice of protest with his characteristic poetic finesse. Palestinian resistance movement

and the liberation struggle provide a backdrop to his poetic musings invoking a tendency among the readers to construe each poem in a preponderantly Palestinian context. Even his reference to a Jewish-Israeli woman 'Rita', in the famous "Rita and the Gun" has been deconstructed as a poem in pursuit for the 'homeland'.² One reason is the recurrent allusion to 'beloved' as a metaphor for Palestine and how Darwish's persona as a poet develops as 'a lover of Palestine' to a 'lover from Palestine' and renders the 'beloved' as a leitmotif in his poetry. As Juliet remarks to Romeo, "What's in a name?", "That which we call a rose/by any other word would smell as sweet." This is further embodied in his poem "A Lover from Palestine". The idealization of Palestine as animate being bearing Palestinian appellation, Palestinian eyes, Palestinian dreams, Palestinian speech and silence; also, Palestinian birth and death renders Palestine as a motif which grows larger than life. Palestine is an indissoluble identity binding the poet to his roots:

Her eyes are Palestinian
Her name is Palestinian
Her dress and sorrow
Palestinian³

The sense of belonging to Palestine approximates to a passionate and intimate bonding where the geopolitical turbulence becomes a foil for the turmoil of a romantic relationship. Palestine has been personified as a female and hence the dramatic analogy between the beloved-motherland. Likewise, his nostalgic piece of poetry "To my Mother"; reminiscing his mother and her homely renditions of 'bread' and 'coffee' has been likened to the yearning for the motherland, attaining the status of a national song. 'Home' or 'homeland' for that matter in Darwish indicates a departure from and return to the 'bread' and 'coffee' of the past, a movement from the transient to the constant and the cyclical locomotion between memory and future to the detriment of the lingering present. The notion of return is also coupled with memory and reminder both. Like a forgotten Elysium, Palestine appears as the 'paradise lost', where Darwish strives to entrench the image of Palestine on the palimpsest of art: "Take me as a toy, a brick from the house/ So that our children will remember to return." The yearning for unison with the beloved sets Darwish's poetry apart from the traditional patriotic poetry. The poet yearns for his art to be solemnized as a reminder of

his eternal love for the beloved motherland and to stand out as a monument of this affiliation for posterity. Here memory is a signal for posterity; for times to come. The distance between 'being' and 'becoming' is bridged through the sombre proclamations: "Let me be, leave me, as the sea leaves its shells/ On eternal coast of exile". 'Return' is a liminal space between the oft-frequented alleys of the past and the anticipation of the future in unison with the celebrated past: "I am the unlucky lover. I cannot come to you. And I cannot return his to myself". The unison with the beloved is a means to seek self-actualization and in this case the beloved motherland being under tyrannical control renders the poet as an object of unrequited love.

Replete with juxtapositions, the kinship between 'writing' and 'history' translates into more of an ephemeral 'memory' and 'forgetfulness'. Writing is tantamount to the conscious renditions of memory, while history has been improvised as a wilful 'forgetfulness' that dominates Darwish's psychic radar, more than deliberate retention of an accepted narrative. Also because history is the dominant narrative, enjoying a certain colonial precedence which the colonized other would better choose to consign to 'forgetfulness'. Thus the alchemical attribute of art is more of 're-writing' and hence metaphorically connected to 'memory'. At times 'land' has been rendered as a metaphor for history which stands for what it is 'not', like the historical account that was lost to the coercive imposition of a certain 'historical' narrative as evident in "Reading my Beloved's Face".

Darwish does not look up for answers, rather raises questions as to the meaning of 'exile and 'banishment' and how homeland becomes a metaphor for the negation of conventional affirmations such as home; not allowed to the Palestinians. Thus Darwish improvises his metrical compositions into an aesthetic of exile and 'temporariness' in contrast to the affirmation of home and 'permanence' rooted in the sense of 'location'. Displacement, banishment, exile, exodus and loss of property rights took a great toll over his memory. Darwish's sojourn in Lebanon is apparent in his poem "The Eternity of Cactus, where Palestine as a metaphor encloses within its spectrum a dialectical relationship between binaries where Palestine 'is' evocative of what it is 'not' today. Thus the thematic concerns such as 'banishment' and 'exile' transmogrify

into a longing for home and homeland. The search for belongingness underlining the crisis of 'banishment' and 'exile' culminates in the poem, "Diary of a Palestinian Wound".

My country is not a suitcase

I am not a traveller

I am the lover and the land is the beloved⁴

The Palestinian struggle against Israel's atrocities is a saga of putting up unflinching resistance against oppression. According to poststructuralist idea of power and its locus, the anxiety extending around the power centre results from the tendency of power to reconfigure. Thus even if the power centre is dismantled; structurally it has the tendency to reconstruct itself, albeit in different forms.⁵ Power can assume distinct shades of meaning when it is tantamount to 'power to', 'power over' and 'power from' respectively. The 'power over' others translates into exercising coercive control, and subjecting the 'other' to compulsion. The 'power to' pursue personal/collective agenda also functions from the vantage point of the holder of power. However, there is another streak of 'power from' that takes to nullify the cumulative effect of the preceding two notions of exercise of power. The 'power from' takes upon itself the manifesto of resisting coercive/compulsive dictates and furtherance of individual/collective ulterior motives.⁶ It is this aspect of 'power' that translates into resistance and is our point of interest in Darwish's poetry. Here the capacity for power to reinvent itself has been looked at in tandem with 'power from', where resistance takes on different connotations such as in the relatively imagistic and plaintive piece of poetry "Love, like meaning". The poem reads like an artifact of love where both love and 'meaning' stemming from art have been treated at the same wavelength invoking empathy with the receiver. Just as love transports into the schematic radar of the beloved, art also transports one into the orbit of the reader/receiver. Spaces are significant in Darwish's poetry which bring out closed, hidebound spaces in comparison with open, natural spaces; likewise urban, cosmopolitan city centres pivoting around fluid and liminal spaces.

There is no margin in modern language left

to celebrate what we love,

because all that will be ... was⁷

Mahmoud Darwish's (1948-2008) uneasy childhood in a Palestinian village named 'Al-Birwa' which was ruthlessly razed by the Israeli forces was his first encounter with Israel's brute force. The denizens of this village along with Darwish's family were treated as refugees whose unwelcome 'absent' presence and an identity virtually reduced to a non-entity laid the seeds of 'resistance'. His vociferous proclamation of selfhood in the poem 'Identity Card' was reason enough for him to be put under house arrest at the hands of Israeli forces.

Put it on record.
 I am an Arab
 And the number of my card is fifty thousand
 I have eight children
 And the ninth is due after summer.
 What's there to be angry about?
 Put it on record.
 I am an Arab~
 Working with comrades of toil in a quarry.
 I have eight children
 For them I wrest the loaf of bread,
 The clothes and exercise books
 From the rocks
 And beg for no alms at your door,
 Lower not myself at your doorstep.
 What's there to be angry about?
 Put it on record.
 I am an Arab.⁸

The constant friction between rights denied to the native denizens of Palestine to the avowed invocation of refugee rights makes a mockery of justice when the rightful owner of the land and property have been dispossessed and disenfranchised. Thus Palestinians have been rendered stateless in their rightful state and live their lives in the shackles of misery. Therefore in a situation where the Palestinians are structurally exposed to colonialism as a precondition of survival, Palestinian subjugation is treated as a given. The hapless Palestinians are forced to flee, or to live under the clutches of occupation or to barely survive in the aftermath of dispossessed rights.

Darwish's imprisonment opens a window into varied spaces where Palestine always looms large as the archetypal 'beloved'. Despite being imprisoned on a biographical note, in his art Palestine assumes the proportions of a 'dungeon', which the poet-philosopher strives to set free. Idealizing Palestine as a beloved, Darwish lends her feminine attributes in his poetry, evident in "My Beloved Rises From Her Sleep": "I remain lost in her body/ The smell of earth that never perishes". The female figure becomes a harbinger of 'rebirth' and 'reincarnation' just as power has the unique feature to reinvent and hence the power of resistance upheld by Darwish. Palestine is thus hope incarnate with the potential to give 'birth' to 'freedom' where Zionism is treated not merely as an expansionist agenda but a breach of human precepts such as freedom, love, peace and even beauty. The idea of Palestinian nationhood is problematic as it entails within its folds the 'Palestinian diaspora', forced into exile, be it voluntary or involuntarily.

In "Reading My Beloved Face" the poet likens the land with history where the land has been a witness to the variegated hues colouring the spatial-temporal epochs. Love in Darwish is a modus operandi of resistance. Just as Palestine is delineated for what it has 'lost' and is 'not' today, Darwish writes passionately about love; even portraying his motherland as a 'beloved' implying 'love' to be a rebellion against conditions which are not conducive to the quest of art and literature. The friction between personal poetic pursuits and the public pressures to usher poetry in a political direction, Darwish retained the equipoise between his artistic impulse and readers' response in his works. His iconic poem "Mural" ends on a poignant note: "I am not mine, I am not mine, I am not mine". This recurrent proclamation also brings out the overwhelming pressure exerted upon Darwish's poetic outlook to conform to the public expectation to the extent of being 'possessed' by general readership.

According to a study based on structural equations model published in 2009, J Prim Prev brings out a directly proportional relationship between cultural variables such as ethnic pride and family values in relation to mediating variables as self-efficacy and perceptibility. The target group was adolescent girls and boys where a higher level of ethnic pride translated into a direct impact of reduced chances of delinquent behaviour. In case of Rita poems we find the interference of cultural affiliation as the stimulus behind the

severance of ties. Both the companions take on different courses directed by their relative cultural and national standing. The results recommend that ethnic pride becomes a shield against detrimental societal patterns and hence incorporating cultural variables into the scheme of culturally inclined prevention measures can bring optimum results. The intersection between power and oppression points in the direction of colonial ventures which tend to institutionalize oppression under the garb of 'white man's burden' and similar precepts. The colonizer usually subverts the traditional affirmations operating in the communities which are also a yardstick of solidarity. Darwish's poetry is an attempt to voice resilience and resistance waged as a mode to combat the framework of oppression. Thus Rita shares the colonial streak with her overwhelming 'absent-presence', her elusive and inaccessible being like the colonizer poised at a high vantage point which arouses envy; being there but eluding the sense of belonging and connection because of being far-fetched.

Writing and history have both been intertwined as epithets of memory and forgetfulness in the larger scheme of resistance. Darwish delineates the Zionist tyranny as an attempt to 'monopolize' history and memory, and even God.⁹ It is as though history and past have been rendered as a battleground whereas Darwish opts for a congenial convergence between memory and history i.e. between the subjective retention of information vis-à-vis the exertion of colonial influence and the colonial enterprise of presenting a certain historical narrative that legitimizes the colonial oppression. In Darwish memory however takes precedence over the select, historical narrative generating from colonial ascendancy. The proclamation of being an 'Arab' and 'Arabness' stems from the memory bank to encompass the future and is profoundly reflected in the 'Identity Card' silhouettes in the poem "The moon did not fall into the well".

What are you doing, father?

I'm searching for my heart, which fell away that night.

Do you think you'll find it here?¹⁰

Where else am I going to find it? I bend to the ground and pick it up
piece by piece just as the women of the fellahin pick up olives in
October, one olive at a time. But you're picking up pebbles!

Doing that is a good exercise for memory and perception. Who knows? Maybe these pebbles are petrified pieces of my heart.

Trying to relive the memory of olive-picking morphs into the alchemical process of writing, literally a poem in this regard. The identity which is intertwined with the memory of the past is dismissed as a passive receptacle of the given genealogy. Identity to Darwish is a given at birth but through the course of life becomes a mode of self-actualization: "Identity is the child of birth, but at the end, its self-invention, and not an inheritance of the past."¹¹ The fond memory in "Rita and the Gun" ends on a poignant hint of ties being severed, precipitating in the poem "Birds Die in Galilee" which becomes a metaphor for a breakup stemming from their strong ties with the 'land'. The opening stanza sets the tone as the femme fatale departs to search greener pastures to discover new meaning in life; hinting at a possible estrangement ensuing from the Zionist skirmishes meted out to the Palestinian. Her disillusionment with the Zionist regime brings her at par with the poet's persona, vying for the freedom of the Palestinians.

In Darwish's poetry the theme of 'exile' emerges as a signpost for future which heralds the seemingly impossible conference of rights of land and language for the Palestinians in the interest of posterity so as to make 'Palestinian' life possible. In a poem dedicated to the demise of Edward Said, Darwish gives in to the profundity of the dialogical mode. He reiterates the apparent 'impossibility' of seeking to locate one along the ethno-linguistic lines, but achievable in a lapse of a generation's time.

He also said: If I die before you,
my will is the impossible.

I asked: Is the impossible far off?

He said: A generation away.¹²

Exile blurs the demarcation between the extrinsic and intrinsic implications of being banished from the rightful and having to survive at the margins of existence. One dwells 'outside' as the other of the innate self, bringing out friction between the 'insider' who knows it inside out but has been forced to the peripheral existence and the exotic self which is more alien to the land that it takes to inhabit as its own. The ongoing series of admonitions emphasize the twice proclamation of 'scream', where it is hard to decipher whether it is an 'admonition' or a resignation. "And scream that you may hear

yourself, and scream that you may know you're still alive,.." sounds as an imperative to protest as a marker of life and hope and not as a cry of dismay and despondency. Towards the conclusion it is as though Darwish lends a new lease of life to Said, who in return is a symbol of Palestinian cause for freedom, cleverly contriving the farewell note as farewell to the poetry of pain to be substituted by a glimmer of hope: Farewell/ Farewell poetry of pain. The 'scream' thus reverberates in the 'song' of freedom which makes both Said and Palestine timeless through Darwish's poetry. In the poem "Who am I, Without Exile?, he poses an existential question before the anonymous other but also himself as he has also been turned into a rudimentary other, dispossessed of the self by the colonial oppression. The hybrid and liminal bonding between the self and the other is accentuated in the lines: "There's nothing left of me but you, and nothing left of you but me,..." The anonymity further bridges the proximity between the self and the other where the persona of the poet and the speaker are connected through the new-found alliance in contradistinction to 'alienation' that results from exile: "He says: I am from there/ But I am neither there nor here".¹³

Conclusion

It is interesting to note how an aesthetic form can be supplanted as a manifesto of resistance against oppression. Darwish yokes together conceits such as memory and history, writing and forgetfulness, sleep and death, self and the other, belonging and exile, unison and separation. The leitmotif of 'love' becomes a site of bringing together the impossibilities of binaries where the lovers hailing from antagonistic groups embrace within their unison the rare opportunity of co-existence. Yet Darwish is realistic in his portrayal where the brief encounter with love culminates in estrangement since the binaries entail and uneasy, unequal relationship, where allegiance with the occupation forces on the part of one of the partners disenfranchises the partner from the subjugated segment. Thus love becomes a metaphor for exile emanating 'alienation' rather than 'connection' ultimately leading to 'separation' for the cause of the oppressed takes precedence over a transient, amorous encounter with the exotic 'other' as evident in the nonchalant enunciation of "Sleep while I Leave"; showing a willful estrangement. It also lays down how sleep like death is a leveler; bringing divergent ethno-linguistic entities on an equal footing, which are separated

only by 'awakening' to the brazen realities of occupation and oppression. He aptly puts it as "Rita is asleep but her dreams are awake" in a repetitive manner. Therefore, the poems revolving around Rita and the numerous prose passages are suggestive of the earnestness with which the political manifesto prevails over the matters of the heart making Darwish's poetry read like a chronicle of Palestinian struggle through multifarious phases of trials and tribulations. The poetry by Darwish becomes an exercise in self-elegy exploring the repercussions of exile and imprisonment, loss of love and belongingness, home and homeliness, precipitating in the extended metaphor of Palestine which encloses the polarities within its folds in a bout of artistic facility. The final poems make a departure from the leitmotif of 'Rita', signaling an evolution in Darwish's poetic consciousness. Darwish's intellectual metamorphosis is catapulted by political obligations which further the course of his stylistic and thematic concerns. Darwish propounds the case in point that art and for that matter peace and freedom can be nurtured only when the Palestinian predicament is resolved and the Palestinians are granted their rights which have not been delivered unto them for more than half a century.

Notes:

¹ Munir Akash, in the Introduction to *Mahmoud Darwish: The Adam of Two Edens: Poems*, ed, Munir Akash and Daniel Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 19.

² Mahmoud Darwish, *From Selected Poems* Introduced and translated by Ian Wedde and Fawwaz Tuqan (Carcanet Press, 1973).

³ Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately it was Paradise* (California: University of California Press, 2003), available online at:

<https://jamiededes.com/2019/03/14/a-lover-from-palestine-poem-by-mahmoud-darwish/>. Accessed May 17, 2022.

⁴ Mahmoud Darwish, *Diary of a Palestinian Wound* available online at:

<https://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/my-country-is-not-a-suitcase>

⁵ Saul Newman, *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought: New Theories of the Political*, (New York: Routledge), 7.

⁶ Nick Malherbe, Mohamed Seedat and Shahnaz Suffla in "Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology" (258-267), available online at: 229616017_The_place_and_function_of_power_in_community_psychology_Philosophical_and_practical_issues

⁷ Mahmoud Darwish, "The Horse Fell off the Poem" available online at:

<https://arablit.org/2018/03/13/on-mahmoud-darwishs-birthday-13-poems/>

⁸ Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory of Forgetfulness* (Beirut: University of California Press, 1995), 113.

⁹ Maya Jaggi, "Poet of the Arab World: Mahmoud Darwish." *The Guardian* (7 June 2002), 8. Available online at: <https://theguardian.com/books>. Accessed May 17, 2022.

¹⁰ Mahmoud Darwish, From *Journal of an Ordinary Grief* available at: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/234476/journal-of-an-ordinary-grief-by-mahmoud-darwish/9780982624647/excerpt>

¹¹ Mahmoud Darwish, "Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading" available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/223184/pdf>

¹² Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 217.

¹³ Mahmoud Darwish and Mona Anis "Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading" in *Cultural Critique* 67 (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2007), 175-182.