

Mahmoud Darwish's Poetics of Desire: Visions and Revisions

Mounir Ben Zid

Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat,
SULTANATE OF OMAN.

mounir@squ.edu.om

ABSTRACT

Mainstream critics have overemphasized the idea that Darwish's poetry is fundamentally humanist and universalist, refusing to succumb to cheap nationalism, chauvinism, or jingoism. However, with close reference to a selection of Darwish's works, this paper aims to attenuate humanistic-universalist guises and demonstrate how his poetics of protest and resistance rather suffer from an incurable malady of hope to serve as the voice of the voiceless Palestinians, rally millions of Arabs around the national cause, and draw world attention to the plight of Palestinians. Though Darwish is often viewed as Palestine's prophet of humanism, evoking the entire experience of exile as a universal human condition at the heart of his poems, the study maintains that he devoted all his energy to portraying the Palestinians' constant dislocation, dispossession, and deprivation of a dignified human life. Darwish's poetics of desire, in fact, struggle against forgetfulness, strive to reconstruct memories of his homeland, act as an historical record portraying the baneful history of his people under colonial hegemony, reflect the communal desire for freedom, mirror Palestinians' feeling of up-rootedness, and dream of an identity that transcends the 'no-exit' position.

Keywords: Darwish' poetics, humanism, universalism, nationalism, memory

INTRODUCTION

Without a doubt, Mahmoud Darwish is the Palestinians' 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 up-rootedness, 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" (Ghannam & El-Zein, 2009, p. 3). 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, as the former French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin imparts with the touch of a pacifist diplomat :

[Darwish] succeeded in showing us the face of hope. 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. (As cited in Avi & Khoury, 2008, p. 1)

Many other scholars like Assmaa Naguib (2012), while endorsing the argument that Darwish is "the most articulate voice of Palestine" and acknowledging his reputation as a poet of national resistance, maintain that "the strength of Darwish's poetry lies [rather] in its ability to wed the political and the personal in such a way that attains universal resonance... His personal experiences of exile and occupation were translated into languages that at times

expressed universal anguish and agony, and at others universal hope and optimism" (paragraph 6).

In his poem "In Praise of the High Shadow," Naguib (2012) further argues the poet does not evoke only Palestine in his poem, but also the human and the humanitarian, the local and the global, "the entire experience of exile as a human condition ... connects the particular to the universal and the political to the human" (paragraph 7). Echoing a type of nationalism that is not devoid of humanity as well as a universal touch in his poems, the poet writes:

You, you are the question.
What do you want?
As you march from a legend, to a legend?
A flag?
What good have flags ever done?
Have they ever protected a city from the shrapnel of a bomb?
What do you want?
A newspaper?
Would the papers ever hatch a bird, or weave a grain?
What do you want?
Police?
Do the police know where the small earth will get impregnated
From the coming winds?
What do you want?
Sovereignty over ashes?
While you are the master of our soul ever-changing existence?
So leave,
For the place is not yours, nor are the garbage thrones.
What do you want?

(As cited in Naguib, 2012, paragraph 11).

In this respect, Naguib's assumptions meld with Saifedean Ammous' (2008) contention that Darwish never loses sight of "the humanism at the heart of his cause and at the heart of the Palestinian struggle" and that he

Continuously disparages nationalism and mocks its silliness... mocks the trappings of nationalism and statehood [and] asserts that the cause has always been about humans, about freedom from oppression, about the revolution against persecution, about the lofty ideals of liberty, and most definitely not about petty nationalism and the toys of statehood. (p.3)

From this perspective, Ammous (2008) shares an affinity with Naguib and reiterates the idea that, even though Darwish's poetry is nationalist par excellence in its portrayal of the Palestinian struggle, it remains humanist and universalist in its essence:

For me, the most striking and admirable thing about Darwish's poetry is how it remained so resolutely humanist and universalist in its message. Never did Darwish succumb to cheap nationalism and chauvinism; never did he resort to vilification of his oppressors or the usual jingoism so common in political art and literature. Never did he forget that his

oppressor too is human, just like him. The magnanimity, forgiveness and humanism he exhibited in his work remain the ultimate credit to this great author (p. 2).

Such vision of Darwish's work, contra Darwish's dogma, voids his poems of the desire to give a voice to people's pain and resistance, liquidates Palestinians' memory, and renounces responsibility for any struggle against forgetfulness and oppression and the fight for freedom and an identity.

Although Darwish has confirmed his attachment to human fragility in his early works and has maintained that poetry can "change everything, [can] change history and [can] humanize," he rather believes that this is mere illusion and that "poetry changes only the poet" (Handal, 2002, p. 1). In other words, Darwish shares Albert Camus' view that the manifestations of rebellion find solace in art, that no artist can tolerate or ignore reality, and that "art should give us the final perspective on the content of rebellion" (as cited in Haider, 2011, p. 21).

Prima facie, there is strong evidence in Darwish's poems such as "State of Siege" that the besieged Palestinians welcome the besiegers and offer them Arab coffee as a strong symbol of humanity, as Darwish affirms in the following lines:

You, standing at our thresholds, come in, / sip some Arab coffee with us! / You may feel you're as human as we are.

Yet, the poem does not end with this hospitable invitation and humanist tone; rather, it verifies how the speaker in the poem is imploring the besieger to vacate their homeland:

You! At the thresholds of our houses,
Vacate our mornings
So we may be certain.
We're as human as you are.

(State of Siege, as cited in Behar, 2011, p. 4)

Due to such askew visions of Darwish's poetry, the paper argues for a revision and a deconstructive reading of his poetics, resists the urge to universalize his work and views it as a threat to its historical specificity. In other words, the paper rejects the monolithic and reductive paradigm, adopts a completely different view on Darwish's work and examine show the poet's primordial concern is rather to re-remember the ashes of a long fabricated and misrepresented history by resorting to the past to re-inscribe the falsified representation of his homeland's chronicles.

Challenging the hegemony of this parlance and skewed vision of Darwish's poetics, the paper argues that readers miss out a wealth of meaning and fail Darwish when they de-politicize his work and limit the power of his poetics to being merely concerned with humanist and universalist issues, in so far as the poet "isn't even just speaking for himself, but for a nation of people who have, since the founding of Israel, found themselves dispossessed" (Vandor, 2010, p.2).

The paper goes on to analyze how Darwish is primarily "the voice of Palestinian resistance" (Ghannam& El-Zein, 2009, p. 1) who reflects on the Palestinians' pain of everyday life, their constant dislocation, dispossession and deprivation of a dignified human life. Darwish's poems, as the paper will demonstrate, aim to mirror the bitter feeling of exile and estrangement felt by the Palestinian refugees abroad and their desire for freedom, independence and hope to return home. The focus will also be on how Darwish's poetics show a nationalist tone instigating Palestinians to persist in their strife against a tyrannical regime which is precluding them from acquiring the right to life.

DARWISH'S POETICS OF DESIRE

The Struggle against Forgetfulness

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. In other words, Darwish endeavors to delineate the constant conditions of the land before the coming of the intruders. The poet's struggle against forgetfulness can be perceived in his works that serve as a commemoration of the eminence and grandeur of those halcyon days. 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

(Why Have You Left the Horse Alone, 1995, p. 64. Henceforth abbreviated as WLHA.)

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 with the relentless oppression they endure in the present.

In "Kind Hearted Villagers," the poet resorts to nature again to reveal the simplicity and splendor 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.

(WLHA, 1995, p. 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 wondering star.

(WLHA, 1995, p. 23)

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 other poems, Darwish portrays his struggle against forgetfulness in a different manner. In "Rubaiyat," the poet recalls the early days and souvenirs through childhood memories:

Wasn't it that child playing near the tip of the well?
Still playing!
All the place is my courtyard.

(WLHA, 1995, p. 64)

Since every part of the place is stamped by souvenirs and memories of his childhood, chastity, and innocence, Darwish wishes to assert his legitimacy of owning the land of his birth and breed. 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 pure witness under sleep.

(WLHA, 1995, p. 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 grand children of the beginning
We are the descendants of the beginning
We only see the beginning.

(WLHA, 1995, p. 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. (As cited in Handal, 2002, paragraph 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.

("Almond Blossoms and Beyond," as cited in Behar, 2011, p. 5)

The Reconstruction of Memory

Darwish's capture of the Palestinian consciousness and collective memory is recalled in most of his works. His poetry, as Akash (2000) argues, "is not only a defense—a self-defense of his personal memory, it is also an in-the-beginning-there-was of a Palestinian genesis, a challenge to the erasure of the memory of an entire nation (p. 122). In many of his oeuvres, 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.

(WLHA, 1995, p. 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, 2011, p. 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 center 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 Urashalim and I ask
Will there be a new prophet for this new time?

(WLHA, 1995, p. 20)

The Desire of a Poet-Historian

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? (WLHA, 1995, p. 25)

As an 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.

(The Adam of Two Edens, 2000, p. 66, hence forth abbreviated as ATE)

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 through the poet's wish to visit Babylon or Damascus as an attempt to escape Israeli curfews.

Describing Palestine as a metaphor for exile, the poet portrays the grief of dislocation, "speaks of his internal exile and up-rootedness, his meditations on his historical, collective, and personal past" (Handal, 2002, p. 1). 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!

The Desire for Freedom

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 that cogitates his aspiration for freedom 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" (as cited in Handal, 2002, paragraph 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.

(WLHA, 1995, p. 36)

Deemed to be the spokesperson of 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.

(ATE, 2000, p. 95)

In other poems, Darwish takes another path to enhance his desire for freedom. In "A Non-Linguistic 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.

(ATE, 2000, p. 125)

The Dream of an Identity

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, ensuing a crisis of identity and a feeling of alienation. The goal of Darwish' work, according to Munir Akash, is to search for "a lost map, a map filled with the actual ruins of a people stripped of their homes, identities and their history" (2000, p. 135). . 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. In this sense, the poet's true identity is his homeland Palestine, which absorbed a maelstrom of identities throughout history:

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. (as cited in Behar, 2011, p. 4)

In "Be String, Water to my Guitar", the poet voices his pain for the Palestinians' feeling of estrangement and identity crisis. The real tragedy, as Darwish exclaims, is that the poet feels he neither feels attached to his own culture, which constitutes the first contributing factor to one's identity, nor does he feel himself to belong to any other culture. This feeling of being in-between is reinforced in the following lines:

Who am I after these paths of exodus?
I own a boulder that bears my name
On a tall bluff overlooking what has come to an end.

(ATE, 2000, p. 163)

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? (As cited in Behar, 2011, p. 6)

The Desire for Border Transgression

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" (henceforth abbreviated as VM) 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.

(1984, p. 13)

Elsewhere in the same poem, the poet vindicates his desire to move beyond the borders and "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" (as cited in Handal, 2002, paragraph 15).

The poet's desire to transgress the borders is also obvious in the same poem when Darwish adopts a series of promises that determine his will to transcend the atrocity of injustice and see the blood of his compatriots fused with nature to give birth to an olive tree as an emblem of a new hope:

We will write our names with scarlet steam
We will cut off the hand of the song to be finished by our flesh
We will die here, here in the last passage. Here and here our blood will
plant its olive tree. (VM, 1984, p. 13)

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.

(Those Who Pass Between Fleeting Words, as cited in Sachs, 2000, p. 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.

REFERENCES

- [1] Akash E. M. (Ed). (2000). *The Adam of two Edens*. Syracuse, NY: University of Syracuse Press.
- [2] Ammous, S. (2008). *Palestine's prophet of humanism*. Retrieved September 25, 2011, from <http://www.electronicintifada.net>
- [3] Avi, I., & Khoury, J. (2008). Mahmoud Darwish-The Death of a Palestinian Cultural Symbol. *Ha'aretz*. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/video-mahmoud-darwish-the-death-of-a-palestinian-cultural-symbol-1.251777>
- [4] Behar, A. (2011). Mahmoud Darwish: Poetry's State of Siege. *Journal of Levantine Studies*, 1(1), 189-199.
- [5] Darwish, M. (1995). *Why have you left the horse alone?* Beirut: Riad El Rayyes Books Ltd.
- [6] Darwish, M. (1984). *Victims of a map*. London: Al-Saqi Books.
- [7] Ghannam, I., & El-Zein, I. (2009). *Reflecting on the life and work of Mahmoud Darwish*. Center for International Studies: Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar (Brief No. 3).
- [8] Haider, E. (2011, Nov 21-27). Universalism versus Reality. *The Friday Times*. Retrieved from May 15, 2014, from <https://kungfupaindoos.wordpress.com>
- [9] Handal, N. (2002, 25 May). Mahmoud Darwish: Palestine's poet of exile. *The Liberty*. Need page number or URL
- [10] Naguib, A. (2012, **April 20**). Remembering Mahmoud Darwish. *Egypt Independent*. Retrieved from www.egyptindependent.com (paragraph 6).
- [11] Sachs, S. (2000, **March 7**). Ramallah journal: Poetry of Arab pain: Are Israeli students Ready? *New York Times*, 3-7.
- [12] Vandor, S. (2010). Mahmoud Darwish: *If I were another?* Retrieved October 5, 2013, from <http://www.Thoughtcatalog.com/shawn-vandor>