

**MAHMOUD DARWISH: THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS PALESTINIANS**

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**Abstract:**

*Major critics have stressed the idea that Darwish's poetry is fundamentally humanist and universalist, denying to submit to cheap nationalism, chauvinism, or jingoism. However, after deep study of selection of Darwish's works, this paper aims to attenuate humanistic universalist guises and show how his poetics of protest and resistance suffer from an fatal malady of hope to serve as the voice of the voiceless Palestinians. Rallies millions of Arabs around the national cause capture world's attention to the plight of Palestinians. Though Darwish is often considered as prophet of Palestinian humanism, he evokes the entire experience of exile as a universal human condition at the heart of his poems. The writer maintains that he dedicated all his energy to underline the Palestinians' constant dislocation, dispossession, and deprivation of a dignified human life. Darwish's poetics of desire, in fact, struggles against forgetfulness. It endeavors to reconstruct memories of his homeland. It acts as historical record portraying the baneful history of his people under colonial hegemony. It reflects the communal desire for freedom. It mirrors Palestinians' feeling of up-rootedness, and dream of an identity that transcends the 'no-exit' position.*

**Introduction**

Without doubt, Mahmoud Darwish is the Palestinians' most eminent poet and his literary works have gained wide recognition throughout the Arab-speaking world. His poems are dramatic and realistic expression of an intense life within a war torn area. As a poet of Palestinian pain, his literary contribution is diverse and politically motivated. His poems also evoke a history of a political and religious struggle against forgetfulness, exile and up-rootedness, and in pursuit for freedom and an identity. Darwish is often identified as “the Palestinian national poet”, who played a significant role in articulating Palestinian identity...and the voice of Palestinian people" (Ghannam & El-Zein, 2009, p. 3). Yet, the very little literature on Darwish's poetics reveals that scholars have underestimated the nationalistic aspect of Darwish's poetry and presume that his poetics are first and foremost concerned with humanist and universalist. The former French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin imparts with the touch of a pacifist diplomat and assumes.

[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 expression in words to this land, beyond countries and peoples. (Avi & Khoury, 2008)

Many other scholars like Assmaa Naguib (2012), while emphasizing 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”.

In his poem *In Praise of the High Shadow*, Naguib (2012) further argues that the poet does not touch 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”. Thus, echoing a type of nationalism that is full of humanity and universal touch is also seen

in his poems, the poet writes:.co.jp

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?  
 (Naguib, 2012).

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.

From this point of view, Ammous (2008) shares ideology with Naguib and restates the fact 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. Ammous writes:

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.

Such vision of Darwish's work contradicts Darwish's dogma, with reference to his poems of the desire to give voice to people's pain and resistance, liquidates Palestinians' memory, and discards responsibility for any struggle against forgetfulness and repression and the fight for freedom and an identity.

Although Darwish has confirmed his concern for human fragility in his early works and has maintained that poetry can “change everything, [can] change history and [can] humanize”, he later on

believes that this is mere illusion and that “poetry changes only the poet” (Handal, 2002,). In other words, Darwish shares Albert Camus' view that the signs of rebellion find solace in art, that no artist can accept or ignore reality, and that “art should give us the final perspective on the content of rebellion” (Haider, 2011).

In fact, there appears strong proof in Darwish's poems such as *State of Siege* that the diseased Palestinians greet the besiegers and offer them Arab coffee. This is a strong sign 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.

The poem does not end with just kind invitation and humanist tone; rather, it designates as to how the speaker in the poem is imploring the besieger to leave 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 lop sided 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 gigantic and reductive paradigm adopts a completely different view on Darwish's work and shows the critical study the poet's ancient concern is rather to re-remember the ashes of a fabricated and misrepresented history by resorting to the past to support the falsified representation of his homeland's chronicles.

Challenging the hegemony of this vernacular and twisted vision of Darwish's poetics, the paper argues that readers fail to comprehend wealth of meaning and misinterpret Darwish when they depoliticize his work and confine 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).

The paper goes on to investigate how Darwish is primarily “the voice of Palestinian resistance” (Ghannam & El-Zein, 2009, p. 1) who supports on the Palestinians' pain of everyday life, their off and on dislocation, dispossession and denial of a dignified human life. Darwish's poems, as the paper will reveal, aims to delineate the bitter feeling of exile and estrangement felt by the Palestinian refugees abroad and their desire for freedom, their craze for independence and hope to return home. The focus will also be on as to how Darwish's poetics show a nationalist tone instigating Palestinians to continue in their struggle against a tyrannical state which is depressing them from acquiring the right to life.

### **Darwish's Poetics of Desire - The Struggle Against Forgetfulness**

Darwish's poetry touches the heart of a history that is known by its agony, sorrow, and desperation. The struggle against forgetfulness is a dominating and profound theme in Darwish's major works through which the poet makes efforts to rewrite the history of his homeland, a history seemingly forgotten and a land wiped off the maps.

In many of his poems, Darwish outlines the status of stability and peace that Palestinians enjoyed before the Israeli invasion and recollects the days of glory, happiness, and harmony. The poet uses nature that symbolizes peacefulness that characterizes the environment 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 insistence against forgetfulness can be perceived in his works that serve as a commemoration of the eminence and glory of those halcyon days. Capturing the Palestinian

consciousness and collective memory in *Rubaiyat*, for example, 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)

By referring to the greenery of his homeland, the poet conceives the peacefulness, animation, and brightness Palestinians enjoyed in the past, and which stands against the relentless oppression they endure in the present.

In *Kind Hearted Villagers*, the poet resorts to nature again to outline the simplicity and splendor of the Palestinians' life in the olden days. He portrays the beauty of the early days and describes how the flowers stand for 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)

Elsewhere in the same poem, Darwish goes back to the early days of his ancestors, their simple and ordinary practices. He compares 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)

In order to assert his struggle against forgetfulness, Darwish enriches his poem with memories from the past, refers to his progenitors and their achievements, and reminds those who claim that they were the native inhabitants of the land that every piece of the region is marked by the footprints of his forefathers' deeds. Thus, he seems to yearn for the golden and glorious days of the past which was replaced by ones of persecution and deprivation.

In other poems, Darwish portrays his struggle against forgetfulness in different forms. 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)

Since every part of the surroundings is stamped by souvenirs and memories of his childhood, chastity, and innocence, Darwish desires to endorse his legitimacy of possessing the land of his birth and upbringing. 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)

In *The Raven*, Darwish takes a different move to affirm his struggle against forgetfulness and reassures 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,)

Through this poem, Darwish voices the faith of his people and their infinite conviction that they are the true 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 rewrite a long history that has been ignored and eradicated and to re-draft 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 depict the poet's desire to go into the past and search for the glorious moments of his innocent childhood on the beaches of Lebanon. In an attempt to recollect 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 encompassing 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 recounts memories of his homeland and of his people to reconstitute the land's shattered identity. The remembrance 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 existence 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 suggests 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 touch to re-remember the land's fractured identity. Moreover, the poet reminds himself of 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 describe to 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 history is rewritten as the land's shattered identity. Connecting the link between the ancient prophets and the city of Urshalim, Darwish shows how this place is the center for Muslims, Christians, and Jews who lived together peacefully before the advent of the Zionist colonizers. In other words, the poet historicizes the religious memory with 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?

(WLHA, 1995, p. 20)

### The Poet as Historian

Representing the Palestinian experience in all its aspects and delineating their anger, Darwish should also be considered as a historian who writes the baneful history of his people, their anguish 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)

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As an historian, Darwish recalls the starting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the foundation of the Jewish state which greeted the human tragedy Palestinians have gone through for the past fifty-four years and continue to bear it 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 disgrace inflicted upon Palestinians and his desire to rise for ever from the constraints and restrictions imposed upon him and his people. This desire is depicted through the poet's wish to visit Babylon or Damascus as a refuge to escape Israeli curfews.

Relying on 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 control 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 record and a history, Darwish's poetry is also praised for Palestinians' resistance and desire for freedom since his works are a mirror of the communicative desire between him and his people to break the chains tied by the colonizer. Not strange that, the poet believes in the strength of poetry as a means of protest 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 longing for freedom is indicated through the butterfly as a means of passing through the bonds imposed by the colonizer and expressed 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 representative of his people, Darwish visualizes their dreams, desire for freedom, and hope for rising from the hideous nature 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 still another path to elevate his desire for freedom. In *A Non-Linguistic Dispute with Imri Al Qays*, the poet requests his people keep on their scuffling against the occupation to attain their freedom. Here, the poet resorts to history to legitimize his strife for freedom and provokes 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 Quest for Identity

Darwish's work is also a statement of his expatriation and up-rootedness and his poems reflect his grief over the Palestinians' dislocation and displacement. No other poet, accordingly, is probably capable of portraying the Palestinians' feeling of up-rootedness better than he since the poet has himself experienced a series of migrations. This feeling of displacement entails the status of Palestinians as constant immigrants, leading to a crisis of identity and a feeling of alienation. The goal of Darwish's 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 speaks of his dream to recuperate it. His poetic strategy to achieve a new identity by mentioning Palestine in his poems, stalls 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 great confusion 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 expresses his pain for the Palestinians' feeling of disillusion and identity crisis. The real tragedy, as Darwish exclaims, is that the poet feels neither part of his own culture, which constitutes the first important factor for one's identity, nor does he feel himself to belong to any other culture. This feeling of being in-sandwich 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 catches the opportunity to touch on the issue of identity when conversing himself with an Israeli government official, and raises his voice to warn 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 used appropriate words for the Palestinians' hope for a normal life, liberation and independence. Through his poetry, he expresses strong feeling about his desire to transgress the borders and remove the chains imposed on him and his people by the colonizer. Darwish's poetry, in fact, reflects the struggle he encountered while spending his life under the occupation and his works reflects 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 justifies his desire to move beyond the borders and “hope in liberation [...], hope in a normal life [...], hope that [his] children will go without fear to their schools, wish 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 seen the same poem when Darwish adopts a series of promises that decide his will to transcend the atrocity of injustice and see the blood of his follow men fused with nature to give birth to an olive tree as an symbol 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)

Expressing his desire to term out the invaders of his homeland, Darwish launched a tirade against intruders:

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 wrong assumption that humanist and universalist ideas are at the core of Darwish's poetry, this paper has attempted to demonstrate that Darwish's writings aim at, first and foremost, to bright high Palestinians' struggle against forgetfulness, frustration, desire for freedom and dream of an identity, and refuse to acknowledge the misrepresentation of the Palestinian people and history. The paper has also argued how Darwish resorts to the past memories and the land's history, evokes memories of his childhood and of his ancestors' traditions to fight for the idea that his homeland belongs to Palestinians who are the real owners of the land. There was also a focus on how Darwish's poetics of desire express the sorrow and longing he feels for his homeland, his pain over its occupation, and his unending 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 sorrow for being under control and thus being subject to the restrictions and confinements, and proclaim 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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