

Syed Sumaira Gilani

Department of English

University of Kashmir

Hazratbal, Srinagar, India

syedsumaira70@gmail.com

Poetics of Identity and Search of Homeland in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry

Abstract

Mahmoud Darwish's poetic oeuvre predominantly focuses on the complex relationship between the Palestinians and Israel. In the present research paper, the researcher would trace down the impact of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry on the 'politics of identity' which he authenticates in his famous poem *Identity Card*. The researchers attempt would be to throw some light on the concept of 'subaltern' or the 'other' which has been a subject of debate in the postmodern era of the twentieth century. His poems highlight the bitterness of the Palestinians and show vigor, rebellion and daring towards the oppression. His poems place the struggle of Palestinians in the broader context of post-colonial tragedies.

Keywords: Resistance, protest poetry, identity, subaltern, other, Palestine Israel conflict, exile.

Introduction

Being part of the broader genre of Arabic literary culture, Palestinian literature needs no introduction as, in the contemporary times, it is characterized by its heightened sense of irony, identity and existential themes. Other thematic concerns that are seen common in Palestinian literature are resistance, exile, occupation, loss and longing for home which further affiliates it with the subject of national identity. Resistance poetry addresses a variety of subjects which include racial segregation, political conflict, shared identity and cultural misunderstanding. Protest Poetry flourishes everywhere including South Africa, United

States of America where protest against racial segregation, cultural oppression and discrimination finds its expression via the Protest Poetry. It becomes a crucial role for the poets to demonstrate and speak the truth to the higher authorities. Poems expose the reality of the elite authorities whose complacency is demonstrated through poetry. Thus, poetry becomes an important tool which helps highlight issues like identity crisis etc.

Born in Al Birweh Palestine, he lived most of his life in exile. For about twenty-six years, he wrote while staying in places like Beirut and Paris, the years that proved to be the most productive of his literary career. During the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, he escaped to Lebanon. Darwish faced arrests and imprisonment for his poetic outbursts at poetry reading sessions and for his political activism. Regarded as the most famous poet of the Arab world, he published his first volume of poetry *Leaves of Grass* when he was twenty-two years old. Since then, his never stopping aesthetics and literary works comprise more than thirty collections of poetry and prose.

His style of writing is diverse which ranges from the classical Arabic style to the monorhymed poems that adhere to the metrics of traditional Arabic poetry. Later, he adopts free verse technique that moves away from the classical rules.

Themes of Identity in Darwish's Poetry

Mahmoud Darwish's poetry symbolized a symbol for Palestinian struggle, their opposition against oppression and he became a spokesperson of their struggle. Darwish's literary outpouring suggests his knowledge of multiple languages which include Hebrew, English, Arabic and French.

In *Resistance Literature*, Barbara Harlow engages with the literature of colonized. The literature is the resistance literature as it directly connects to the armed struggle. The literature revolves around the themes of identity, freedom, nationalism.

There are two forms of Arab resistance: Armed Resistance and Literary Resistance.

Since the research concerns resistance through poetry, this took shape in the form of the Arab poets. In his article, "Wells of Bitterness: A Survey of Israeli-Arab Political Poetry", Emile Nakkeh indicates

Israeli-Arab poetry graphically depicts the discrimination against, and mistreatment of the Arab minority. (Nakkeh 245)

Literary resistance took active part in resisting the existing barriers to the freedom struggle of the Palestinian inhabitants. Palestinian poets did not give up their resistance against colonization and continued to form an even deeper concern for their motherland. Mahmoud Darwish emerges as the foremost poet who revived the Arab literature and came to be widely regarded as the father of the Arab resistance poetry, the title attributed to him by various critics and scholars. His literary resistance and love for the land could be seen in his poem *Identity Card* with the element of refrain. Darwish writes, "*Write down! I am an Arab*" (Darwish 1-2). In his poems, Palestinians discovered their struggle and experience of displacement. Darwish once wrote. "Every beautiful poem is an act of resistance" (Darwish 81). During his poetry readings, Darwish was often seen quoting *Mural*.

... *I only found my estranged self*

Am I the collective I? (45)

Darwish further reflects, "I am not mine" (Mural 45). These lines highlight the idea of solitude and solidarity. Mahmoud Darwish is seen occupying a strange position that lies between solitude and solidarity with the Palestinians. He is seen engaging with his identity, thus, invites an internal dialogue with his 'I'. Palestine becomes the heart and soul of Darwish's poetry. His poetry highlights the historical erasure of Palestinian struggle against oppression. It places the struggle of Palestinians in the broader context of post-colonial tragedies. In his poem, *The Penultimate Speech of the Red Indian*, Darwish discusses the settler colonies in Palestine and the powerful erasure of indigenous cultures. Darwish writes,

Let's give the earth enough time to tell

The whole truth about you and us. (Darwish 152)

With his creativity, his poems grew more conversational by discussing issues of mundane realities and the metaphysical. His later poetry suggests fragility in the existence of human beings and a paradox of being part of the alien world. His later works look more fragmented in terms human existence and human beings' journey to an unknown realm. His narratives suggest real and imaginary homeland as majorly recurring themes and the impossibility of homecoming as the idea itself haunts him.

The people living in Palestine suffer from internal exile to the extent that their identification as an inhabitant of Palestine is questioned. They live in a continuous mental exile but the struggle which they have long taken for the assertion of their identification and of their indigenous self is reflected through the symbolic representation in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry. Darwish's poems are replete with metaphors of exile and the notion of identity. they lament on this great loss and poetry the psychological commotion; the Palestinian people undergo each passing day. His poetic technique beautifully conveys his ideas about the tumult. One of the important subjects of his poems is exile, which comes to life when Mahmoud Darwish deals with it to show the Palestinians as refugees in their own country and struggling and thriving for their existence. Darwish uncovers his heart in the form of poetry in order to make the world aware of the Palestinian circumstances. To emblemize the collective voice of the Palestinian people, Darwish uses various manifestations of exile, identity, myth, and history in his poetry.

The theme of exile is also dealt by the famous American author, Earnest Hemmingway in his novel *The Sun Also Rises*.

...going to another country doesn't make any difference. ...There is nothing to that (Hemingway 19).

Victor Hugo, in a letter, talks about the impact of his exile on the island of Guernsey where he lived for 15 years. According to him,

Exile has not only detached me from France, it has almost detached me from the earth.

(Hugo 45)

It is in his state of exile that Darwish dedicates himself to his homeland.

First appeared in Arabic, *Identity Card* was later translated into English in 1964. Close examination of the poem reveals the constant refrain from the very beginning of the poem as in the lines

Write down!

I'm an Arab (Darwish)

These lines are repeated five times in the poem, thus, gives the impression of the poet's deeper concern for his land and his outrage of being dehumanized as if he's nothing more than his identity card number. The poet, in the following lines, asserts that he has eight children to take care of and feels proud for not being reduced to begging before the government or its citizens as he could earn enough to feed his family. But he fails to understand why the treatment of the Israeli government is such and asks them if they are angry.

The poet reminisces about his working-class family. He recalls his family background, his ancestors and his grandfather who taught him to read and work, but before that they taught him how to love his motherland. The author repeats the line twice, "I have a name without a title" (Darwish) in order to describe himself not only in terms of the identity card that bears his number, but he goes on to describe himself as having been stiffened by the lack of feelings due to the destruction caused by snatching away his land from him that he used to work upon with his grandfather and his children. Although, he is from a lower working-class family, he feels proud of being one associated with such an ancestral lineage

and asks the colonizing forces if they are satisfied with his status.

He further complains about the stolen orchards of his ancestors and the land on which he and his children worked. It has been stolen from his family's future generations because they left nothing for them except for the rocks. The poem closes by assuring his oppressors that he does not hate them but makes sure if the usurpers continued to destroy the identity of indigenous people of Palestine, he would become hungry and usurpers flesh will quench his thirst of hunger.

The poem became the signature poem of Mahmoud Darwish's poetic oeuvre. It made him a constant target of vicious criticism from all quarters: Israeli religious groups, conservative groups, and the ultranationalists. Darwish assumes the symbolic persona of an ordinary Palestinian victim of oppression by an Israeli official. To underscore his own Palestinian cultural and national identity, he shuns the language, Hebrew. He takes up the language of Arabs. The poem's power lies in its stark language, uplifting tone and commonplace, direct images, making him a brilliant and successful contributor of his people's cause and suffering.

Identity Card becomes a primal scream that reminds all Palestinians of the catastrophic events of 1948 and their tragic aftermath. Assertion of his Arab identity becomes immensely important for him and an essential necessity under such occupation.

Subaltern and the Other in Darwish's Poetry

One of the great subjects of interest is to examine how critics from outside the field of 'subaltern' perceive the term subaltern and other related issues of postcolonial theories. It is no strange to reveal how the Western military as well as the Western political power has dominated the other parts of the world through policies of oppression. Similarly, the Western cultural tradition and thought process has left no stone unturned to control the ways of thinking and comprehending different subjects. By arguing in favor of the Western culture,

tradition, and literature, they, in a way, disregard the other minority cultures and traditions, thus, assigning them as marginalized and neglected.

It was David Ludden who traced the terminological development of the term 'subaltern' from historical perspective. The historical roots go back to

The late medieval English ... By 1700, it denoted lower ranks in the military... By 1800, authors writing from a subaltern perspective published novels and histories ... (Ludden 45)

The term was later perceived in a nonmilitary sense in the 1920s and by 1930s, Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci applied the term to a group of people who represent the outside of the established power structures which include slaves, peasants, religious groups, women and minority races who are always on the margins of history (Gramsci 202). Gayatri Spivak discusses the concepts of 'subaltern'. She highlights the relationship between the colonizing power and the subaltern groups. She suggests the engagement of the subaltern group, in its literary form, with that of the processes of the British literature. She believes that Third World literature is not a separate thing rather interconnected with world cultures. The Third world is part of the metropolitan world (Spivak 247). Her thoughts triumphed with her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In this essay, she chooses Indian women as the subaltern group and views their plight by discussing 'sati'.

Each subaltern group has its own specific experience and thus would be difficult for someone from outside the group to speak for the subaltern, how it feels and how difficult it is to hear their voices. She believed that the biased image of the east by the western narrative had a colonial propaganda. By understanding this propaganda, Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish represents a voice of the subaltern highlighting the double marginalization of the Palestinians: through the western culture and Israeli forces. Through his poetry, he has been able to raise his voice not only for himself but for his people, for the Palestinians. He speaks

of the Palestinian subalterns, addresses their issues of identity, their martyrdom, and their struggle for freedom.

While looking closely at the recurring themes in one of his poems, *I Come From There*, exile and dispossession is what keeps repeating itself through vivid imagery and metaphors. He feels a deep connection with his country, making claims of its ownership to his ancestral land, even inventing the final word, "homeland". He says,

... broke them up

To make a single word: Homeland... (Darwish)

Palestinian occupation has now become an analogy in human history. The world has witnessed their struggle for dignity, and their right for existence. In spite of being occupied and their land being snatched away from them by the Israeli forces, they continue to yearn for peace and justice. It is this injustice imposed on the natives of Palestine that Mahmoud Darwish deals in his poetic outbursts. What Darwish did with his powerful poetry, made the whole world witness the atrocities on Palestinians. He universally appealed for peace between the two nations and wished the two countries merge with each other finding the other half as part of the whole.

Conclusion

Mahmoud Darwish reached at the epic of his literary career by contributing to the Palestinian cause via his poetry. His life summarizes the Palestinian journey of suffering and agony. His poetry encompasses a history of Palestine. His poetic architecture is more benevolent, precise, rebellious, and nationalistic, because he writes from the perspective of the Palestinians, ruminated to be one of the groups of subalterns. Darwish strived for the best to represent the voiceless and speak for the oppressed groups irrespective of the differences they had among themselves. He discusses different zones of subaltern, be it poet's own self,

his family, his motherland, or his nation. His poems highlight the bitterness of the Palestinians and show vigor, rebellion and daring. Being free and creative, he did not bind himself within the confines of any ideology. His poetry showed gilt-edged transmogrification, once he went against the public expectations and developed his own turn of phrase for documenting, a commendable act of chivalry by an Arab intellectual.

Bibliography

- Darwish, Mahmoud. "I come from there." *The Bed of the Stranger*, Translated by Anton Shammas, Riad El-Rayyes Books, 1999.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. "Identity Crad." Translated by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forche, *Unfortunately, It was Paradise: Selected Poems*, U of California P, 2003, p. 5.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. *Journey of an Ordinary Grief*. Translated by Ibrahim Muhawi, Archipelago Books, 2010.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. *Mural*. Translated by Rema Hammani and John Berger, Verso, 2009.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. "The Red Indian's Penultimate Speech to the White Man." *Harward Review*, no. 36, 2009, pp. 152-159.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.
- Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. Methuen, 1987.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*. Scribner, 1926.
- Hugo, Victor. *Selected Letters of Victor Hugo*. Translated by Jane Smith, Oxford UP, 1996.
- Jaggi, Mya. "Poets of the Arab World." *The Guardian*, 8 June 2002.
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jun/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview11>.
- Ludden, David. *Peasant History in South India*. Princeton UP, 1989.
- Nakkeh, Emile. "Bells of bitterness: A Survey of Israeli-Arab Political Poetry." *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1971, pp. 235-246.
- Nye, Naomi Shihab. "Mahmoud Darwish is the essential breath of the Palestinian people..."
Poets.org, <http://poets.org/poet/mahmoud->

[darwish#:~:text=About%20Darwish's%20work%2C%20the%20poet,into%20the%20world's%20whole%20heart.](#)

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. MacMillan, 1988.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1985, pp. 243-261.