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Resistance from a Distance: Mahmoud Darwish's Selected Poems of Exile in English

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore Mahmoud Darwish's resistance to the occupation of his homeland in selected poems written during his exile. Though Darwish was exiled from Palestine, his poetic voice of resistance gained momentum even from a distance. The discussion in this paper will focus on how Darwish utilizes Palestinian nature as a form of resistance to the occupiers of his homeland in his selected poems of exile. The theoretical framework employed in this study was derived from both the postcolonial and the ecocritical theories of reading literature and named in this study as an ecoresistance framework. By explicating the aspects of ecoresistance in Darwish's selected poems of exile, we hope to provide new insights into man's connection to land as a strategy to defy colonial rule.

Keywords: ecoresistance, Mahmoud Darwish, poems of exile, poetry, resistance.

Introduction

Palestine and Palestinian nature remained at the heart of Mahmoud Darwish's poems of resistance written during his exile. In fact, by employing nature as a form of resistance to the occupation of his homeland, Darwish's poems are intimately connected to Palestine from which he was displaced for about twenty-six years. His poetic resistance to the occupation of the homeland was an effective means in the political mobilization of Palestinians in the years of exile from 1970 until 1995. Frangieb (2008) asserts that Mahmoud Darwish has indeed played a leading role in his political commitment to Arab national causes and in enriching the modern Arab poetics as a whole. With the emergence of Darwish and his extensive writing over a span of fifty years, an immensely rich voice of resistance was added to the Arab world in general and to Palestine in particular. Edward Said (1994) in his *Culture and Imperialism* considers Darwish as one of the eminent poets of decolonization in the world. Rahman (2008:41) remarks "as a poet of exile, Darwish's poetry has long been preoccupied with a reflection on home". The nature of his homeland provided him with several signposts of opposition from a distance. In this context, the current paper is intended to provide an insight into the modes of Darwish's resistance from a distance of the occupation of his homeland through his use of nature.

Mahmoud Darwish was born on March 13, 1941 in the village of Al-Birwa, Palestine. He became a refugee in 1948, when his family was forced to flee the occupation forces. In 1949, Darwish and his family came back from Lebanon to live as "internally displaced" refugees in another village in his homeland. Ahmed (2012: 397) remarks that "along with more than 750,000 other internally displaced Palestinians who lost homes, possessions and wealth; Darwish experienced being a in a state of limbo from 1948 onwards until he was forced to leave again in 1970". With the emergence of Darwish's poetry in 1958, a rich voice is added to the Arab world in general and the Palestinian poetry of resistance in particular. He began to compose poems when he was still in school aged seventeen. His resistance poetry prospers during his early poetic stage that spans twelve years. He lived outside Palestine for about twenty-six years during which his resistance poetry burgeoned noticeably. Writing from within one's country and outside of it in Darwish's circumstance of being displaced and expelled requires further scrutiny. What issues of resistance is he putting across to his people in the homeland, his occupiers as well as the audience whom is he is writing for from outside Palestine? By paying attention to this period of Darwish's life, we hope to demonstrate the ways in which he utilizes the images of nature from his motherland to show more keenly the loss of home and the need to resist, even from a distance.

In the 1970s, Darwish joined the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and he became an active member of PLO outside Palestine. His activism in exile remained dynamic not only politically but also poetically. His resistance through the use of nature continues in the substantial flow of his poems from a distance. In 1980s, he lived in Beirut where he edited the *Palestinian Affairs Journal* published by the Palestinian Study Centre. He produced many poems of resistance that hinged on the use of Palestinian nature during this period. For instance, 'The Ode to Beirut' and 'A Eulogy for the Long Shadow' are two examples of Darwish's poems of

resistance in exile. However, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 led Darwish to leave for Tunisia, Egypt and Paris where he settled for about thirteen years. Commenting on his resistance activism in exile, Frangieb (2008:24) remarks, "after the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, Darwish remained determined to continue the Palestinian struggle. The theme of exile and continual resistance is most elegantly conveyed by Darwish during this period". In the late 1980s, his activism intensified. He served on the PLO executive committee from 1987 to 1993. Meanwhile, Darwish's resistance poetry reached its peak at the start of the first Palestinian uprising (*Intifada*) that broke out in December 1987. In addition to the Palestinian *Intifada*, another important event in the Palestinian history that influenced the poetic output of Darwish in this period was the Oslo Accord in 1993. The first Palestinian *Intifada* forced Israel to the negotiating table with the PLO in 1993. However, the resultant Oslo Accords signed by PLO leader Yasser Arafat in 1993 caused the resignation of Darwish from the PLO executive committee as a sign of protest. Commenting on Darwish's poems produced during his years of exile, Rahman (2008) states that his poetry has long been preoccupied with the reflection of homeland. She adds that his later production from 1984 until 1995 reflects his exile from his physical home, his exile from the physical refuge and his exile in the poetic production.

The selected poems of exile and resistance from the 1970s include poems such as 'A soft Rain in A Distant Autumn', 'A Song to the Northern Wind', 'A Diary of a Palestinian Wound' and 'I Love You or I do not Love You'. The selected poems of exile from the 1980s and early 1990s include poems such as Ode to Beirut' , 'The Hoopoe', 'The Land', 'Tragedy of Daffodils and Comedy of Silver' ,The Bread' and 'I See What I Want'. Collectively, this body of work emphasizes that Darwish's exile appeared to illuminate the path of his resistance to the occupation of the homeland with increasing attribution to nature.

The current study is an attempt to link between the postcolonial theorizing and ecocriticism in terms of nature's employment in poetry such as that of Darwish's poetry of resistance. Since Darwish, who is regarded as the father of the Palestinian poetry of resistance, has employed nature as a means of resistance in his poetry while he was inside and outside Palestine (Ahmed & Hashim, 2012). This form of resistance is coined as "ecoresistance" which has been derived from the ecocritical and postcolonial theories of reading poetry. According to Mohsen (2013:110) ecoresistance can be defined as "a theoretical approach and an analytical lens that is used to examine how nature and its various forms can be utilized by poets to further their agendas. It is a combined lens of the two theories - ecocriticism and postcolonial theory that can be applied for reading poetry". Therefore, ecoresistance has its roots in both ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. Ecocriticism, on the one hand, is a recent aspect of literary theory, which has been growing swiftly since the early 1990s that focuses mainly on the study of the relationship between humans and the natural world. It has evolved out of many traditional approaches to literature and the literary works are viewed in terms of place or environment. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996: xviii) define ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". Postcolonial theory, on the other hand, embraces the concept of resistance. Slemon (1995:107) asserts that "the first concept of

resistance is most clearly put forward by Cudjoe in his *Resistance and Caribbean Literature* and by Barbara Harlow in her book *Resistance Literature*. For Cudjoe and Harlow, "resistance is an act or a set of acts that is designed to rid a people of its oppressors, and it so thoroughly infuses the experience of living under oppression that it becomes an almost autonomous aesthetic principle". Further, Harlow (1987: 2) argues that the Palestinian writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani in his study titled *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966* first applied the term 'resistance' in description of the Palestinian literature in 1966. Palestinians have been struggling to regain their occupied land since 1948. Their resistance took two forms. The first is armed resistance and the second is literary resistance. The Arab resistance (both armed and literary) is closely related to the Palestinian movement of resistance that can be dated back to 1936 that gave birth to the Arab poets of resistance such as Darwish and his companions. Darwish, who is regarded as the poet of resistance and decolonization, has employed nature as "a form of resistance in his poetry while he was inside and outside Palestine" (Ahmed & Hashim, 2014: 94).

Analysis

The blending of the two theories illuminates the new ways Darwish uses the imagery of nature for resistance throughout the span of his poetic production (Mohsen, 2013). The concepts used in the current study are adopted under the umbrella term of ecoresistance. These concepts are centrism, interconnectedness and forms of nature. These concepts can be discussed in Darwish's poems of exile to show how he employed nature as a new form of resistance. This kind of resistance depicted by Darwish through the way in which he views the sun and other aspects of nature in the new situation in exile as can be traced in the following lines of the poem, "A soft Rain in A Distant Autumn", in which Darwish depicts a picture of the setting of his exile and hence resistance. He has utilizes the forms of nature to highlight his resistance from a distance as in the following lines when he declares:

Soft rain in a strange autumn
The windows are white
In addition, the sun is a pomegranate at dusk
And I did not abandon the orange tree

In these lines, Darwish utilizes the forms of nature such as "rain", "autumn", "sun", "pomegranate", and "orange tree" to contrast his present situation of being exiled with the land he once knew. The autumn is strange even though the rain that falls here is the same as the rain in Palestine. He argues that he has not abandoned "the orange tree" which evokes that Darwish is saying that he has not abandoned his fight in exile. In the poem "A Song to the Northern Wind", which is a flashback of Darwish's homeland in exile, Darwish depicts the moon as an addressee:

O' nice-looking moon
You are a friend of childhood and fields
Do not allow them to steal the dream of our children

In these lines, the poet depicts the moon of exile as a nice-looking one that is required to keep alive the dreams of Palestinian children of regaining their occupied land. The image of the moon in these lines is in direct contrast with the image of the moon depicted in the occupied land where the moon looks "sad and tranquil" (Darwish 2000:15). The moon of exile is collocated with the idea of dreams and the fields as they are in close intimacy to each other. This image of intimacy and friendship between the moon, the children and fields evoke the sense of centric resistance depicted against the occupiers to whom the poet refers as "them". By giving an imperative "do not allow them" to the moon, the speaker is demonstrating that "niceness" does not necessarily indicate a weakness of character. Just as Israeli occupation forces "steal" their land, the Palestinians must guard against further violation of their dreams. This form of resistance is proposed in Darwish's poem, "The Hoopoe", in which Darwish depicts the flowering of resistance through nature in exile as in the following lines:

However, we are captives
Our wheat jumps over the fence
And our hands rise from our broken chains

In these lines, the poet expresses his state of being captive in exile. However, this state of captivity releases implicitly his sense of centric resistance to remain dynamic. To him, the wheat of Palestine and the hands of Palestinians shape a united form of resistance that will defeat the occupiers of the land at the end of the day. The wheat of Palestine is given the quality of humans' crossing over a barrier and the captive Palestinians will break the chains and raise their hands to support the jumping wheat. The similarity between the wheat and Palestinians is that the occupiers have jailed them inside their homeland. The Palestinians are symbolized as "wheat", a plant that is not characteristically strong but when it is clustered together, it becomes a force that can bring down the colonizers.

The poem, "A Diary of a Palestinian Wound", is a portrayal of the continuous suffering of Palestinians under the occupation. In this poem, Darwish takes a step further and depicts a kind of organic interconnectedness between Palestinians and their land when he declares in the opening lines of the poem that Palestinians and their land are one flesh and bone. This image evokes many emotions and implications and above all, it formulates a strong kind of resistance that can be described as a form of interconnected resistance. Then, Darwish goes further to build up that organic interconnectedness that evokes intensified sense of centric resistance when he declares:

Our land and we are one flesh and bone
We are its salt and water
We are its wound, but a wound that fights.

The pronoun "we" refers to Palestinians inside and outside Palestine. The image "we are its salt and water" evokes the sense of a bonded relation between Palestinians and their occupied land because salt and water are two important ingredients of seawater that is impossible to separate. The image of "salt and water" invokes the sense of rootedness. The centric resistance flowers in the organic image of "we are its wound, but a wound that fights". The wound is a type of injury in which the skin is torn and cut. In pathology, it specifically refers to a sharp injury that

damages the dermis of the skin and it is either an open wound or a closed wound. Salt, when applied to a wound, is extremely painful. However, when salt water is applied to it, it becomes a healing agent. Darwish depicts this image of being 'one flesh and bone' to highlight the painful situation when the flesh removes from the bone that implicitly symbolizes the organic interconnectedness between Palestinians and their occupied land akin to what Edward Said (1994: 226) illustrates of Darwish's impulse of resistance on Palestine:

Restore to me the color of face
And the warmth of body
The light of heart and eye
The salt of bread and earth… the motherland.

This form of interconnectedness can be drawn out from the poet's unique identification with the various forms of nature in exile as can be proven in the poem "Ode to Beirut", when Darwish declares:

The wind and we
Blow together on the land
The wind is the digger
Making home for us
In our homeland

In these lines, Darwish identifies himself with the wind. He gives an amalgamated portrait of airstream and Palestinians as one force of resistance against the occupation. They are also interrelated with each other in the sense that the wind makes a home for them in their homeland.

In the poem, "I Love You or I do not Love You", Darwish expresses his resistance through the image of the seas' waves as can be seen in the following lines:

The seas' waves are boiling
In my blood
One day I will come back
To see you and leave

In the lines above, the poet utilizes the waves of the sea to convey his resistance. The image "the seas' waves are boiling in my blood" is a hyperbolic image that reveals his inner wrath against the occupation of the land. This hyperbolic image evokes the intensity and strength of resistance. The word "boiling" which occurs in these lines does not actually relate to its literal meaning, which is the rapid vaporization of water that occurs when water is heated to its boiling point. The word "boiling" here used symbolically as well as hyperbolically to evoke the poet's spontaneous and powerful flow of his struggle. Like the million bubbles of the waves that crash onto the shore, so is the intensity of the speaker's emotions as he waits for the day when he will return as the colonizers leave his land. The poem, "Tragedy of Daffodils and Comedy of Silver", was written in 1989 as a wonderful portrayal of the supportive and responsive stance of Palestinian nature in the whole tragedy of Palestinian resistance against the occupation of their land for about forty-one years. Darwish depicts the sun as:

The sun does not allow them
To remain on the holy land

It will burn their faces and skins
It will shine in every heart
The fire for which we are all

In these lines, the sun is shown to be the natural supportive power of the Palestinian resistance to the occupiers of the Palestinian land. It interpenetrates the Palestinian resistance and provides the energy for them to carry on their resistance. Darwish looks beyond the natural function of the sun and makes it a force of opposition that will oust its occupiers. While the heat of the sun burns the skin of the illegal inhabitants of Palestine, it will act as the fire of defiance to the victims. Accordingly, the sun plays double roles of resistance. The external role of the sun in resistance is to burn the skins of the invaders on the occupied land of Palestine. More importantly, the internal role of the sun in resistance is to empower the Palestinians' resistant hearts to carry on and to activate opposition in the passive hearts, which is symbolized by the fire, within the hearts of Palestinians to resist the occupation to regain their land. To Darwish, the sun, like the other natural forms of Palestinian nature, has a powerful spirit that helps and supports the Palestinian battle. Technically, flora refers to all the plants that grow in a particular region. In the context of the current study flora refers to the Palestinian flora that has also been utilized. "The Bread" exemplifies an example of an employment of flora as in the following lines:

The flowers of my land
Make chains of freedom
And never to fade
They tend to destroy our flowers
However, they will flower again

These lines expose the national flowers of Palestine that are red in color called Poppy flowers. The redness of these flowers symbolizes the intensity of Palestinian resistance. The beautiful poppy flowers dominate the Palestinian land in the spring. Their vivid color inspires Palestinians and gives them hope of freedom. The occupiers systematically destroy these flowers from the Palestinian fields in an attempt to uproot the Palestinians' hopes and squelch their dreams. Nevertheless, to Darwish, the spring will come, and the poppies will bloom again, and so too will the Palestinians' dreams to regain their lost land.

Fauna refers to all types of animals that live in any particular region or time. In this context, it is used to refer to the animals of the occupied land of Palestine that have been used by Darwish to convey his message of resistance in exile. The most important form of fauna used by Darwish to further his resistance in exile is the horses as can be traced in the poem, "The Land" where Darwish says:

In the month of March
The horses of our land
Wake up and run
To Jerusalem

In these lines, the poet depicts the Palestinian resistance that falls on the thirtieth of March on what is known as "The Land Day". It is an annual day of commemoration for Palestinians. The

Land Day was initiated in 1976 in response to the Israeli government's plan to expropriate large tracts of Palestinian land for their own purposes. Consequently, Palestinians organized a general strike and demonstrations all over Palestine against the Israeli plan of 'Israelizing' Palestinian land. Therefore, Darwish in the lines above depicts the image of "the horses of our land" which evokes the Palestinian resistance. The use of the horses here allows us to consider a wide range of possible meaning conveyed by the poet. Horses were used in warfare since ancient ages in Arab and Islamic history. In the Islamic perspective, horses are symbols of *jihad (*struggle), an Islamic term used to refer to a religious duty of Muslims. Darwish uses the horses to evoke the sense of opposition against the occupation by depicting the horses running towards Jerusalem, the third holy place for Muslims, to revive the historical events of Jerusalem that was once invaded by the crusade forces. However, the Muslim leader Salah Al-Deen Al-Ayubi attacked them with his men and horses and dismissed them from Jerusalem nine hundred years ago. This brief incursion into history highlights the historicity of Darwish's use of nature to show the length of Palestinian struggle to regain the homeland.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have interpreted Mahmoud Darwish's selected poems of exile through an ecoresistance stance. The analysis of the nine selected poems of exile displays the development of the modes of Darwish's preoccupation with his lost homeland during the second phase of his poetic output that spans a period of twenty-six years. It also shows that Darwish's ecoresistance towards the occupation of his homeland has flourished in exile to the highest level and manifested in three major modes. The first is the centric resistance in exile that blossomed in a bond of humans and nature used as a resistance force against the occupiers of the land. The sun and the poet, the moon and the poet and the wheat and the poet are among the most important forms of Darwish's centric resistance in exile. The second major mode of ecoresistance in exile is interconnected resistance that manifested in many forms termed as the forms of interconnectedness in exile. The discussion revealed that the major forms of interconnectedness in Darwish's poems of exile are both humanized and naturalistic forms as the most significant forms. The third mode is defiance shown through the forms of nature that have been utilized as a vital means of resistance from a distance. The analysis showed that Darwish's ecoresistance has markedly flowered in the forms of nature that range from pure nature to nature that has been cultivated. In short, Darwish's poetic voice of resistance through the forms of nature has been intensified in exile to the highest because he has shown, in varying degrees, how he remains linked to his land of birth although he is exiled from it. He remains emotionally and psychologically bound to Palestine even though he is physically estranged from it. His struggle to free his land from the clutches of the regime gains momentum through his employment of nature identified with his land. Like the sun that never sleeps, Darwish is the Palestinian son that could never sever his umbilical cord with his motherland, even though he writes from a distance.

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