

Political and Humanitarian Commitment in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish

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Abstract

The research represents an endeavor to analyze "the literature of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish" concerning the themes of political and humanitarian commitment in his poetry. It explores how the poet grappled with the tragedy of the Palestinian issue, wherein entire lives were transformed into a resistance and struggle for existence and identity against a usurping and deadly enemy that sought to subvert facts and camouflage matters. Through literature, Mahmoud Darwish sought to depict the plight of the Palestinian individual, the suffering endured, and the aspirations tied to the liberation of a land unjustly stolen. Darwish endeavored to articulate the dreams of refugees and displaced individuals, emphasizing the longing to return to their homeland, Palestine. For him, this return represented a dream that must be realized, as it serves as a guarantee for the survival of Palestine and the preservation of Palestinian self, existence, and identity. In pursuit of this objective, Mahmoud Darwish employed a variety of literary styles, employing the most apt words and structures with exceptional skill. His proficiency allowed him to resist occupation, thereby securing Palestine for its people and maintaining it as a haven of peace.

Keywords: Palestine, Resistance, Humanity, Poetry and Literature

Introduction

In this brief research, we attempt to understand the concept of political and humanitarian commitment in the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, stressing that poetry is one of the literary genres most capable of revealing the resisting mind and manifesting existence and commitment.

Undoubtedly, the Palestinian issue stands out as the focal point that thrusts Muslims into a rigorous struggle and confrontation, wherein malevolent forces converge to usurp Palestine, debilitate populations, and fracture their unity. This concerted effort aims at asserting control over their material and moral wealth, constituting an unparalleled conspiracy in the annals of human history, from the time when humans first trod upon the Earth. This nefarious scheme employs terrorism in all its latest and most modern manifestations. While discourse on Palestine in literature, poetry, and prose may be perceived as repetitive, the gravity of ongoing injustice necessitates a continued commitment in both word and deed. From this perspective, Mahmoud Darwish's poetry occupies an esteemed position in the realm of literature. He penned hundreds of poems and compiled poetry collections, mirroring the steadfast dedication of Palestinian advocates and resistance figures who authored numerous books. These publications, past and present, offer a comprehensive portrayal of the issue,

encompassing events and emotions imbued with tragedy, alienation, eagerness, enthusiasm, and revolution. Through his work, Darwish articulates unwavering loyalty to the cause, expressing the fervent desire for the return of the land to its rightful people.

“Resistance literature embodies elevated values and symbolism, serving as a source of inspiration for champions aligned with these ideals. It reflects a revolutionary and jihadi combat experience, strategically utilized by writers as an expressive tactical weapon. This literary form aims to mobilize and shape the public opinion towards the concept of resistance, infusing it with vitality and youthfulness, irrespective of the antiquity of its origin.” (Al-Osta, 2008)The meaning of the term "commitment" has evolved, coming to signify conscious contribution and human participation across all fields. Perhaps this distinction lies in the disparity between commitment and obligation. Commitment involves choice and election, whereas obligation lacks such voluntariness, encompassing aspects of climate, behavior, and thought. It is observed that obligation compromises the element of choice, yielding outcomes contrary to the initially intended goals. Commitment, conversely, is the voluntary acceptance of responsibility, entailing an individual's willingness to bear consequences and make sacrifices. Mahmoud Darwish's literature exemplifies a universal human narrative prevalent in every nation enduring prolonged, oppressive circumstances. These conditions prompted Darwish's emotions to reject injustice, rebel against it, and defy submission. Consequently, a new poetic phenomenon emerges in modern Arab poetry—the poetry of "Darwish." This term refers to works dedicated to highlighting Palestinian rejection, resistance, and uprising in the occupied territories, reflecting political and humanitarian commitment.

Language has been and continues to be a crucial tool for communication and confrontation, with humans employing it as an effective element in self-defense. Throughout history, numerous pieces of evidence attest to its influential role, ultimately transforming it into various literary forms such as literature, poetry, rhetoric, and others. Hence, Mahmoud Darwish's literature can be characterized as an expression through language, evolving into a text and a platform for defending individuals in their struggle against aggressors, despite the multitude, diversity, and variance in their characteristics. Consequently, the topic maintains alignment with this formative historical trajectory.

Darwish examines us from within the state of resistance itself and subsequently from within the poetic process. In other words, the human revolutionary idea dissolves within the artistic fabric of the poem. Here, Darwish purposefully distances his poem from overt shouting and excessive rhetoric. He directly addresses the Zionist enemy, challenging its hostile actions and asserting that it cannot obliterate the Palestinian presence, regardless of the intensity of its efforts and violence. In the poem "Say What You Want," he declares:

“Say whatever you want, put dots on the letters
Put letters together to generate words
Vague and clear, and the words begin
Put the words on the metaphor. Put the metaphor on
Imagination Put imagination on its far side
Place the remote on the remote and the rhythm will be generated
When strange images of an encounter intertwine
Reality with the quarrelsome imagination.” (al-diwan, 2022)

Darwish's poem does not originate from a singular central focus that captures the poet's thoughts, visions, imagination, and images. In other words, it lacks regularity and a specific contextual framework. The thematic movement he explores revolves around the juxtaposition of confidence in achieving the goal—namely, the return to the plundered homeland—and the concurrent fear and anxiety of not attaining it. This humanitarian and political commitment finds embodiment in various poetic passages within Darwish's oeuvre.

From a technical standpoint, Darwish's poem is a visionary, complex, and multi-voiced composition in which the epic and the lyrical, the abstract and the tangible, the mythical and the real, and the partial and the universal interweave. Despite this, a comprehensive and universal character predominates in its structure, often at the expense of daily details and specific life facts. Darwish's artistic prowess and his distinction from the majority of Arab poets lie in his adept use of language and his unique approach to its nuances.

Brief history of Mahmod Darwish life

Mahmoud Darwish, born on March 13, 1941, and passing away on August 9, 2008, was a patriotic, passionate, and Palestinian poet. He is widely regarded as one of the most significant figures in Palestinian, Arabic, and international poetry, his name becoming synonymous with themes of patriotism, resistance, and revolution. Darwish stands out as one of the foremost contributors to the evolution of modern Arabic poetry, introducing symbolism into its contemporary expressions. His poetry is characterized by a blend of love for his homeland, entwined with themes of the female lover and the mother:

Dearly I yearn for my mother's bread,
My mother's coffee,
Mother's brushing touch.
Childhood is raised in me,
Day upon day in me.
And I so cherish life
Because if I died
My mother's tears would shame me" (Forman., 2007).

Mahmoud Darwish published his inaugural collection of poems, "Leaves of Olives," in 1964, when he was merely twenty-two years old. Noteworthy among his English-translated anthologies are: "The Butterfly's Burden" (Copper Canyon Press, 2006), "Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems" (2003), "Stage of Siege" (2002), "The Adam of Two Edens" (2001), "Mural" (2000), "Bed of the Stranger" (1999), "Psalms" (1995), "Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?" (1994), and "The Music of Human Flesh" (1980). Darwish has been lauded as an embodiment of the traditional political poet in Islam.

A member of the Palestinian National Council of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Darwish played a pivotal role in drafting the Palestinian Declaration of Independence announced in Algeria. Born in the village of Al-Birwa in Galilee near the coast of Acre, Darwish's family became Palestinian refugees in 1948, initially relocating to Lebanon. They returned as infiltrators in 1949 after the cease-fire agreements. Discovering his village in ruins, a Zionist agricultural village named "Ahihud" stood in its place. Afterward, he resided in another village. Following his secondary education at the Yeni Secondary School in Kfar Yasif, Darwish worked

at his political party press (Al-Ittihad and Al-Jadeed), eventually becoming a supervisor in editing. He also contributed to the editing of the newspaper Al-Fajr, which he published.

Mahmoud Darwish is widely acknowledged as one of the preeminent poets of Palestinian resistance, having lived through exile and displacement while shouldering the burdens of the Palestinian cause. His poetry is marked by its proximity to the truth of experience and authenticity in portraying the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Darwish's voice resonates as he depicts his love and repudiation of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Despite the siege on the Palestinian people and attempts at physical, psychological, and cultural erasure, Mahmoud Darwish succeeded in his poetic odyssey. His poems exhibit an ability to penetrate their historical context and transcend temporal boundaries, fulfilling the condition of representing another time, a pursuit he steadfastly aimed for and this is what he sought:

“As for me, I say to my name: Leave me

Get away from me, I've been tired since you spoke

Expand your qualities! Take your traits and test

Others... I carried you when we were able to” (Darwish, aldiwan, 2008).

Mahmoud Darwish faced repeated arrests by Zionist authorities on charges related to his statements and political activities. Following these incidents, he traveled to the Soviet Union for studies and subsequently sought refuge in Cairo, where he joined the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Later, he relocated to Lebanon, where he engaged in work at the publishing and studies foundation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Additionally, he established the Cultural Al-Karmal magazine.

Darwish assumed the role of president of the Palestinian Writers and Journalists Association and served as the editor of Al-Karmal magazine. Initially residing in Paris, he eventually returned to Palestine with a permit to visit his mother. While in Beirut, he functioned as the president-editor of the Palestinian Affairs magazine and later became the director of the Palestinian Liberation Organization Research Center before founding Al-Karmel magazine in 1981. However, due to the Lebanese civil war that spanned from 1975 to 1991, he was compelled to leave Beirut in 1982 following the invasion of Lebanon by the Zionist army led by Ariel Sharon. This invasion resulted in a two-month-long siege of the capital Beirut and the expulsion of the Palestinian Liberation Organization from the city.

Darwish found himself in a state of "wandering exile," moving from Syria, Cyprus, Cairo, and Tunisia to Paris.

Critics have categorized Mahmoud Darwish's poetic evolution into distinct phases, encapsulating the poet's relationship with his homeland, the "Palestinian cause," exile, departure from home, and various facets of his self-identity. Critic Muhammad Fikri Al-Jazzar, in particular, delineated three key stages in Darwish's poetry:

The first stage encompasses Darwish's presence in his homeland (Palestine) and marks the beginnings of the poet's development. It underscores his awareness of the Palestinian cause within the context of Israeli occupation, and the formation of his deep connection to this homeland.

The second stage, identified as the stage of revolutionary awareness, extends until 1982 when Darwish departed from Beirut. During this phase, the poet's collective sentiments, cultivated in the first stage, find organized expression.

The third stage represents the phase of potential awareness and human dreaming.

Darwish passed away in the United States of America on Saturday, August 9, 2008, following an open-heart operation at the Texas Medical Centre in Houston. Subsequently, he lapsed into a coma, leading to his demise after doctors at Memorial Hermann Hospital decided to disconnect the life support devices, as per his recommendation. Darwish's legacy includes thirty poetry books, along with prose works, letters, and biographies, all of which are infused with genuine aesthetic pleasures. In his poem "The Death of the Phoenix," he reflects:

"In the songs we sing there is a flute.
In the flute that dwells within us there is a fire.
In the fire that we kindle there is a green phoenix.
And in the elegy of the phoenix I can't tell my ashes
apart from your dust" (Darwish, 2003).

Political and Humanitarian Commitment

Throughout his career, which spanned more than half a century, Mahmoud Darwish sought to take his poetry into a deeper human space than the circle of daily political commitment. His poem "Think of Others," written in the late 1990s, clearly embodies this endeavor. He wrote:

"think upon others"
When you prepare your breakfast, think upon others
Do not forget to feed the pigeons
When you engage in your wars, think upon others
Do not forget those who demand peace
As you pay your water bill, think upon others
Who seek sustenance from the clouds, not a tap
And when you return home – to your house – think upon others
Such as those who live in tents
When you fall asleep counting planets, think upon others." (edinburgharabicinitiative, 2014)

This concise poem encapsulates numerous meanings found in international legal conventions concerning human rights, offering what appears to be a response to the prevailing questions in our contemporary world and the events unfolding across various regions globally. Such a reading puts Darwish's poetry on another test, as it comes years after his death, and places his poetry at the heart of questions of the current reality, especially those related to the conditions of refugees and problems of integration.

There is a similar look to his poem "A Seat on a Train." In the poem, Mahmoud Darwish strikingly describes the feelings of people on their way to an unknown future, often on strange trains. He describes each train station as another place of refuge. It reinforces the refugee's feeling of fear of Unknown. The poet says:

"All the passengers return to their families, but we do not return to any home. We travel in search of nothing, so that we may achieve the rightness of butterflies. Windows, but not for

us, to exchange greetings in every language. Was the earth any clearer when we rode the horses of the past? Where are these horses? Where are the maidens of the songs? And when in us are the songs of nature? I am distant even from my own distance." (Darwish, 2003).

In an interview with the critic Charbel Dagher, Darwish asserts, "The strength of hope does not always emanate from articulating an optimistic resolution to a human massacre, for even the potency of sadness and despair, when expressed creatively, generates hope. This hope lies in the human capacity to create." (Dagher, 2019)

Darwish says in his poem "State of Siege":

"Here, where the hills slope before the sunset and the chasm of time
near gardens whose shades have been cast aside
we do what prisoners do
we do what the jobless do
we sow hope." (Darwish, State of Siege,, 2010)

The wound metamorphosed into a rose, notwithstanding Darwish's reiterated emphasis on liberating his poetry from its documentary nature. On the contrary, he successfully evolved the perspective on the concept of political commitment, intertwining it with human commitment. His poetry vividly delineates the trajectory of this evolution, intricately connected to the poet's maturation of expertise and experiences. In the initial stages within the occupied Palestinian territories, he penned texts that rendered his poetry a vessel for the predicament of the "people of tents," a conspicuous manifestation of the deep-seated notion of "homelessness and asylum."

In the 1980s, he authored an article demonstrating exceptional awareness regarding the importance of freeing the text from the constraints of the present moment. He stated,

"What jeopardizes the development of our literary discourse is the daily intrusion of the political, as we are continually confronted with a project of annihilation that mobilizes all defensive energies, thereby undermining literary excellence." In a moral quandary, almost as if questioning the humanity arising from such aesthetics, he further commented, "If literature's essence lies in its role as a laboratory for creating aesthetics, how long will our humanist sensibilities tolerate this paradox that transforms wounds into roses? Has life accustomed us to prioritize efficacy over aesthetics? However, literature achieves efficacy precisely because it is literature, not merely for the sake of efficacy (alquds, 1985).

In his concluding phase, Darwish's poetry transcended direct political connotations, redirecting its focus towards capturing nuanced details. He endeavored to articulate a more humane conception of Palestinian identity, drawing inspiration from the intricacies of lived experiences in specific locales. This departure aimed to move beyond restrictive definitions that tethered Palestinian identity solely to its cause or confined it within descriptions of asylum.

The human presence in the poem mirrors that of a non-supernatural dervish. His discourse arises from weariness and embraces simplicity. He represents an individual who has distanced himself from his role, disavowing the circumstances that gave rise to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its attendant brutality. Seeking refuge, he longs for a sanctuary that extends beyond the political realm to encompass the emotional.

A review of Darwish's articles, published in Al-Ahram newspaper during his brief sojourn in Egypt between 1971 and 1972, reveals the poet's early inclination to "humanize the enemy" rather than to "demonize" them. By accentuating the humanitarian plight of this perceived adversary, a moral standpoint can be established, thereby enriching the significance of resistance as a prerequisite for human liberation. This perspective extended to include the collection "State of Siege," penned in response to the siege imposed on Palestinian President Yasser Arafat in Ramallah in 2003.

"To a killer: If you reflected upon the face
of the victim you slew, you would have remembered your mother in the room
full of gas. You would have freed yourself
of the bullet's wisdom,
and changed your mind: 'I will never find myself thus.'" (Darwish, State of Siege,, 2010)

In an interview, Darwish stated, "I no longer articulate the Palestinian political moment; instead, I delve into the humanity of the Palestinian. Thus, I shifted from the specific to the universal, expelling the political discourse from my expressions and delving more profoundly into the tragedy of the human condition. I transitioned towards humanizing the Palestinian issue, forging a connection between the question of nationalism and the overarching existential inquiry." (Maarouf, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of political and humanitarian commitment in the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish unveils a nuanced and transformative journey of poetic expression. Darwish's evolution, marked by distinct stages, reflects a deliberate departure from overt political themes toward a more profound exploration of the human experience. From his early emphasis on the Palestinian cause and resistance, Darwish gradually shifted his focus to encapsulate the broader spectrum of human emotions, identity, and existence.

Darwish's poetic endeavors reveal a conscious effort to humanize both the self and the perceived adversary, transcending the limitations of political discourse. His articulation of a humane concept of Palestinian identity, grounded in the lived experiences of individuals, underscores the interconnectedness of the personal and the political. By elevating the significance of human liberation through resistance, Darwish imparts a moral dimension to his poetry, prompting a reevaluation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Ultimately, the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish stands as a testament to the power of language to transcend political constraints and resonate with the universal aspects of the human condition. His ability to weave together the political and the humanitarian illuminates the enduring relevance of his work in fostering understanding, empathy, and contemplation in the face of complex socio-political realities.

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