



## *The Lost and Forgotten: Exploring the Narratives of Darwish and Silko*

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**Abstract:** This essay was written in response to Darwish's book *Memory for Forgetfulness* along with Leslie Marmon Silko's book of stories, *Storyteller*. The author, Kyleen Aldrich, discusses the effects of languages disappearing, the loss of culture, diversity, and knowledge of nature and history. She explores Darwish's book as a work that is seeking liberation through remembering and confronting the past in order to retrieve what is lost by capturing actions with words. Silko and Darwish speak of discrimination, displacement, and exile of a people. Aldrich explicates the importance of memory and shows that by remembering, we recognize what is lost, what can be reclaimed and how writing makes it possible to preserve these memories. She employs writing as history's witness in these two works. Inspired by the words of Silko and Darwish, the author talks about the common misconception of humans who see one another as separate when we are united by our connection with the land. She asks questions such as while the world is changing, what are we doing to save it? This serves the purpose of calling attention to the warning sent out by Darwish and Silko to all that not enough attention is focused on land and culture and what can potentially be lost.

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*"And as we move away, we can see ourselves turning into memories. We are these memories. As of this moment, we'll remember each other as we'll remember a distant world disappearing into a blueness more blue than it used to be"*  
(Darwish 60).

So many languages are disappearing. Our knowledge and appreciation of diverse cultures, nature and history are being lost. As time moves on, more and more things are lost.

In *Storyteller* by Leslie Marmon Silko, there is a recurring theme of loss that is subverted as the writing attempts to preserve

what is at stake. By telling stories, she tries to keep the memory of the homeland and the tradition of oral culture alive. Her writing advocates cultural endurance and through the stories of Pueblo culture, she creates a clear connection of the people to the land. Silko tells stories about storytelling, to show the culture and its identity. "They passed down an entire culture by word of mouth, an entire history, an entire vision of the world which depended upon memory and retelling by subsequent generations" (Silko 5-6). Oral culture was the story of the people; it was what kept them

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alive. It is hard to maintain life without culture, because culture *is* a way of life. Silko is transforming an oral culture to one preserved on paper. The reader can trust Silko's words because of the ancestry within them. She was raised by the stories of the Laguna Pueblo culture and she honors the many generations that have passed on in her writing.

A constant battle between memory and forgetfulness is waged in Mahmoud Darwish's book *Memory for Forgetfulness*. His writing serves as a return to the past, a record of one day, of a life, of a cultural identity. I see his work as a memorial to the struggles of the Palestinians, which seek liberation through remembering and confronting the past and retrieving what is lost by capturing actions with words. Darwish states his purpose: "we want to liberate ourselves, our countries, our minds and live in the modern age with competence and pride. In writing, we give expression to our faith in the potency of writing. And we announce further that we are children of this age, and not of the past or the future" (141). He speaks for those who protest in silence, when he says he wants to be remembered, he wants to feel that Beirut exists despite the bombings, and he wants to recover his lost identity that has been swept away by the tides of war.

Both cultures are occupied, physically and mentally. How do the writers break through the barriers of convention? By telling their stories, they try to break free of the stereotypical chains constricting Native Americans and Palestinians. Many of Silko's stories are centered on interdependence of mother and child, which represents the need to take care of the future because their culture is always under attack. An example of this can be seen in Silko's story *Lullaby*. She tells of how "Laguna culture had been irrevocably altered by the European intrusion — principally by the practice of taking the children away from Laguna to Indian schools, taking the chil-

dren away from the tellers who had in all past generations told the children, an entire culture, an entire identity of a people" (Silko 6). Though the Americans may have believed that they were 'civilizing' the Indians in these schools, they were destroying their culture. The Indians were forced to speak English and to cut their long, braided hair, resulting in a suppression of their Indian language and traditions. When an Indian returned from fighting in an American war he was changed. Leon, in "Tony's Story," is flabbergasted when Tony kills the white policeman who had been harassing them. Perhaps Indians were seen as savage people for killing the white man, because that was the only way they could prevent the cultural invasion of white supremacy; they were ridding their culture of the 'white devil'. "Americanization" is synonymous with cultural loss.

The Palestinians in Beirut were living in exile after being forced out of Palestine by the Israelis in 1948. They were displaced in camps and became great resistors, refusing to let the Israelis justify their cruelty. Americans were behind the scenes, aiding Israel — the perpetrators of the Beirut siege. Darwish observed that being white was "something more precious than freedom itself" (98). He speaks in the voice of an oppressor when he says, "these Palestinians are not human. They're animals who walk on all fours" (77). In response to this racism, Darwish reasons that, "he has to strip us of our humanity to justify killing us, for the killing of animals — unless they're dogs — is not forbidden in Western law" (77). But when we see what is being done, who is really the animal?

Stories about loss are not considered happy tales. Silko and Darwish speak of discrimination, displacement, and exile of a people. But is it wrong to tell 'bad' stories? We should not obliterate chunks of history simply because they do not exemplify the good deeds of man. Telling a 'bad' story is not malicious, because all stories matter.

What is malicious is trying to hide parts of history. Leaving out something would be like telling the truth, but not the whole truth. In the words of the old man in *Storyteller*, "It will take a long time, but the story must be told. There must not be any lies" (Silko 26). People who have written history have altered it; there is always a struggle to tell the whole truth. In *Storyteller*, the woman in the story has killed a man, and she is promised she will be set free from jail if she says he "just fell through the ice." But she does not lie; she knows she killed him. Lying would change the story and she had learned this from the old man who "would not change the story even when he knew the end was approaching. Lies could not stop what was coming" (Silko 32). And lies cannot change history. Silko's stories switch back and forth from good to bad, but that is the point she is trying to make. She is giving us the whole picture, not just what we want to hear. The bad stories shed light on the possibility of a better life for all. The idea of transformation and its healing powers found in many of Silko's stories inspires the belief that change can bring about something good from something bad.

When I first read Silko's *Yellow Woman*, it sounded like a 'bad' story. She had been kidnapped by Buffalo Man, was far away from home, raped, and forced to journey all the way back home alone. Yes, these things are bad, but did good come out of it? I came to realize that *Yellow Woman* was not hurt by these experiences. She had forgotten her past and was trapped by her culture, and in the story you can see a change; she needed the experience to learn what the past means to her culture. When Buffalo Man left, she was free to go if she wanted, but she chose to stay; it wasn't kidnapping anymore. What we see in society in a negative way tends to be strictly labeled as a bad thing, but in Silko's stories these principles are reversed. It is important to open our eyes to more than one side of life and to awaken to a deeper understanding of the world. We

need all the stories to avoid isolation of people and events; in this way we create collective memory.

Our culture tends to erase bad moments in history, or at least, we try to forget them. This kind of amnesia is prevalent in the U.S. Why is this? Is it because we don't want to remember ourselves in a bad light? What would happen if we tried to forget the history we don't want to remember? Would that erase its existence? Darwish writes about the bombing of Hiroshima and says, "what I remember of Hiroshima is the American attempt to make it forget its name" (Darwish 84). The Americans tried to bomb it out of existence, along with its people. But by doing so, they created memory, and we cannot cover up the wrongs done to a country with flowers over graves of those who lost their names. Darwish feels that Americans don't care about Palestine. Do Americans care about Indians? Do we address these terrible wrongs committed against them? Is it racism that makes us act this way?

There were numbers of people who died in the bombings of Hiroshima who cannot be recovered, but math cannot account for loss. Can language account for loss? If our society tries to hide the bad things, then why is our media only plagued by stories of disease, racism, violence, and death? These stories have lost their meaning in the world today. Death is talked about in the news and is given no more speculation, causes no more grief, and heeds no more importance than what the weather will be like tomorrow. Will making a quick reference to the deaths of thousands of people in the newspaper make up for it?

We need to remember. By remembering, we create recognition of what is lost, recognition of what can be reclaimed; we are saving by witnessing the past. Can we make up for the mistakes of the past by letting its stories be told? We keep the stories for those who come after us, but more importantly, we keep the stories for those who

were before us, so that we may remember them, and cry for them.

Do we write, then, to preserve the memories? Darwish says, "it is galling that we should be ready during these air raids to steal time for all this chatter, defending the role of the poet whose writing is unique because it is rooted in his relationship to the actual as it unfolds, that we should be doing this at a moment in which everything has stopped talking, a moment of shared creativity when the people's epic is shaping its own history" (Darwish 64). He implies that the people themselves are the memory. If that is so, what happens when the people die? Does the memory die too? Perhaps this is why we must write. If there are no people, who will tell the story? Writing is history's witness. It unites what is separated, creates poetry from silence, and memory from words.

Writing itself is under siege in these books, as much as Beirut. I see writing as an attempt to revitalize language, but the poets struggle for the right language. What is the right language? Darwish asks, "What is poetry? Poetry is to write this cosmic silence, final and total" (Darwish 154). Does silence hide language? Poetry exists, even if it is not being written, it is still there. But can poetry actually capture in words what is taking place? If history cannot speak for itself, these memoirs will. These authors tell the story of the cruelty and slavery towards Indians and Palestinians, but "anybody can act violently — there is nothing to it; but not every person is able to destroy his enemy with words" (Silko 222). Silko and Darwish are striking back with their words, releasing them to the world, and exposing their oppression.

In Silko's stories, we learn about the Pueblo culture and its issues. But she is not just writing for the benefit of indigenous peoples, she is writing to inform the West of new ways of knowing, hoping to break the barrier of conventionalism and stereotypes. We need new ethics that focus on what mat-

ters, what has been lost and what needs to be found. We learn from the Native Americans in Silko's stories of the interconnectedness of all things. Aunt Susie's stories depict transformations between humans and nature, humans and animals, little girls and butterflies. Silko and Darwish point out the common misconception of humanity; that we see ourselves as separate from each other, but we can come together, if we so choose to see the connection of us all with the land.

In these stories, the people are part of the land, and attached to it. The Palestinians living in Beirut are being told to leave, are being murdered in great numbers, but they cannot leave. The Native Americans live with the land, the earth is their mother, the sky is their father, and the winds are their brothers, and they are together always in life and in death (Silko 51). The purpose of these stories is to remember land. Is it possible that one can live in a place for ten years and still not know it or their existence in it, like Darwish, because it has changed?

Land is being changed, and it is being destroyed. I feel that Silko's stories are a signal that "drastic things must be done for the world to continue" (Silko 65). While the world is changing, what are we doing to save it? I believe Darwish and Silko want to do more than just preserve the memory of the land they remember; they want to save it, and fight for it. Darwish and Silko send out a warning to the people who do not pay enough attention to land and culture. The bear made of ice is coming and we are gradually losing our grip of the earth, as we are too busy waging a war against ourselves, destroying nature and culture in the process, all the while strengthening separation.

#### WORKS CITED

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