



Darwish and the Meaning of Palestine

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Abstract: Darwish's poetry was a central part of what is to be a Palestinian and to be an Arab. By weaving the personal and the political, Darwish gave a voice to the Palestinian struggle for self determination, as much as to the human inner quest for love and survival. I grew up learning his poems, hearing them sung by famous Arab singers, repeated in worldwide demonstrations of solidarity with the Palestinian people. His departure left me, and a whole generation of Arabs, deeply bereaved for his death represented not simply the loss of a great poet, but also the necessity to re-question the meaning of Palestine. Darwish's poetry reminds us that Palestine is exile as much as home, a struggle for political justice as much as for what it is to be a cosmopolitan citizen. It remains the quintessential human struggle for dignity, justice and humanity, globally as much as locally.

It was a year ago that I was in Palestine attending a poetry recital of Mahmoud Darwish. It was the first that I ever heard him recite his poetry live. I did not know that it was the last, for him as well as for me, as he died 3 weeks afterwards, in Texas, 6000 miles away from Ramallah. The concert/recital was in July, in the beautifully constructed cultural palace of the hilly Palestinian city-dubbed future capital, built with the money of the international donor community to prove its commitment to the Palestinian cause. It was a contribution to enable Palestinian art to flourish in the midst of the confines of over 145 Israeli checkpoints, in the Bantustans that they were actually living in.

Darwish was austere and the audience ecstatic. He stood on the stage with a certain shyness and started to recite his poetry as a

lover flirting with his beloved, a lover that has aged and was wondering what was the meaning of it all, all this life of his, all this struggle of his, all this trajectory that he and his country have gone through and which his poetry so intimately weaved together. "I am from there" he recalled, and "the earth is closing onto us" he reminded us just as "there is fog over the bridge" the bridge of exile as much as of return, only to ask in the end to just "let me down here," for while I am tired of the journey. He said more and more, recited old and new poems, and read them with such a sensual voice that made you desire as much as cry, want to hold him, touch him, delay the recital's ending only to accept that you cannot; his poetry is too deep a part of you and of Palestine to be contained in a word, symbol or act.

The death of Darwish came as shock to

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me and, I would add, to all my generation of Palestinians and Arabs, all those who grew up learning his poems, hearing them sung by famous Arab singers, such as Marcel Khaleefeh, repeated in demonstrations of solidarity with the Palestinian people. I felt bereaved, deeply bereaved, for his death represented not simply the loss of a great poet, but also the closing of a very important chapter of the life of Palestine. It forced on me, and I suppose many other Palestinians, to re-question the meaning of Palestine, which Darwish has often done and struggled with. Darwish's poetry was as a central part of who I am, of what it is to be a Palestinian, of what it is to struggle for your humanity globally as much as locally, of what it is to become a cosmopolitan cause, a cosmopolitan citizen.

I was born in 1967, few months after the 1967 war, the Naska, or debacle as it is called in Arabic. I was born in exile and my family became de facto refugees. Darwish was just 25 years old, he had started already to write poetry, had already lived the Nakba, the catastrophe, when his native village Al-Birwa was wiped out with Israel's creation, and was already in prison in 1962 for opposing Israel's military rule over the Palestinians. He had already written his poem, "I long for the bread of my mother, the coffee of my mother and the touch of my mother ... and I desire my life because if I die I would be ashamed of the tears of my mother." This is the first poem I learned in school when I was six year old, it is the one we sang on mother's day ever since. For a little girl just trying to come to term with her separation from her mother, it made perfect sense. For all Palestinians trying to come to term with the loss of Palestine, with exile, it could not be more poignant.

I grew up in exile in many Arab countries. In all of these places, Darwish accompanied me in my Arabic classes as he did my relatives and friends going to school in Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Yemen and Dubai, among other places. "Write down I am an Arab, and my ID card number is ... I have 8

children and the 9th is about to come," wrote Darwish in a poem that came to represent Palestinian assertion of their Arab identity, of their right to self determination. Growing up in the US or France, it resonates with every Arab ostracized and oppressed by a colonial power. For Mona, my friend growing up in Nazareth in schools that censored what Israel considered Darwish's "inflammatory poetry," her teacher used to sneak the poems and get the students to learn it. Mona, who would become a teacher herself, would not stop reciting Darwish to her kids and friends. That was before Darwish became legal, when Israel's Minister of Culture Yossi Beilin allowed his poems to be included in the Israeli curricula after the Peace process in 1993, only to see these removed after the Sharon government in 2001.

Darwish gave a voice to the Palestinians trying to affirm their existence in a world that negated them and their rights. He did it by always weaving the personal with the political, with a lyric that echoed the magic of classical Arab poetry albeit by completely transforming its traditional structure. He left Haifa in 1969 to go to study in Moscow only to move to Cairo, the heart of Arab culture at the time, to then join the "Revolution" in Beirut in 1972. He became a member of Palestinian Liberation Organization, expressed its quest for freedom and self-determination, composed its anti-colonial third-worldist struggle in his famous *Nuptial* ('Aras) volume. Darwish also wrote Arafat's speech at the United Nations' General Assembly in November 1974, where he presented to the world the Palestinian cause, affirming their right of Return to their land. "I appeal to you to enable our people to establish national independent sovereignty over its own landI have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand."

But the world took away the olive tree and the gun, and watched, rather than defended, the Palestinians as they were denied their most basic rights to life. In 1982, Israel

invaded south Lebanon in a campaign intending to wipe out the PLO. The Palestinians came under heavy Israeli artillery and airplane attacks, were besieged under the barrels of death and fear, trapped in heat of the Beirut summer for over 88 days, living yet more fear and death. Darwish wrote his *Memory for Forgetfulness* then, a memory whose forgetfulness becomes all the more impossible after the massacres of Sabra and Shatila in September 1982. The Palestinians were again on the route of exile, this time even further away from Palestine, in Tunis, this time further away from the refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, where refugees were left to their demise, to more war and misery in Lebanon, to near-forgetfulness in all the other diasporas.

For me the 1982 war was a turning point in my consciousness as a Palestinian. Darwish helped me articulate my political consciousness as I was turning 15 years of age. He wrote the *Epic of Beirut and Siege of the Sea's Praises* in 1984. He is most remembered by my generation with his epic Ahmad Al-Arabia, Ahmad the Arab. I might well not be living in the refugee camps of Beirut or Syria, I still remain Palestinian. I might not be in Nablus or Haifa, but I am still Palestinian. I might not have lived the Nakba or the daily life of the six day war in 1967, the Naksa, I remain Palestinian. I was still living the exile of Dubai, an Arab city that refused to give me citizenship rights. I was deprived of returning to my father's house in Palestine, where my grandmother, aunts and cousins still lived. I was made to feel impotent as I watched the Palestinians being killed and massacred while other states paid lip services without stopping the killing. I did not belong anywhere and yet I was related by blood as much as by consciousness to those dying to return home. Palestine meant exile as much as home, meant a struggle for justice as much as a quest for some peace.

Darwish carried his exile around with him, as much as I and all those living outside Palestine did. After Beirut, he went to

Tunis only to decide that Paris is more adequate as a refuge. He oscillated between Paris, Jordan and Tunis, making his poetry acquire a deeper cosmopolitan essence. He carried the Palestinian experience beyond its reality of dispossession and into the universality of human struggle for dignity and survival. He widened its Arab foundation and all the literary Arab texts he draws upon by weaving the Roman and Greek tragedies, the genocide of the Indians, the loss of Andalusia, and the Mongol invasion into his stanzas. By the eruption of the first Intifada in December 1987, the Palestinians were celebrities, tragedies and not simply terrorists. They were "children of stones" defying Israeli tanks in Gaza and West Bank to claim their independence. By the early 1990s they were the last anti-colonial movement still lingering on after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

But Darwish also struggled with wanting to just be human, with how to reconcile the image of the hero/victim with that of a man just eager to live a simple, trivial life. If Palestine was the muse, the mother, the cause and the home, he negotiated with it and his intimacy, his love and his deepest existential struggles. Darwish was always a lover, and his poetry was as important to my identity as a Palestinian as it was to being a woman. His *Bed of the Stranger* tickled my love stories, set free our love demons, echoed my, and other women's, struggle to simply be who I am, "a woman nothing more or less," accepted for what I am not for what I am expected to be, not carrying the weight of patriarchy nor the burden of idealized romanticized fetish. I remain embraced by "the exile of man in woman and of woman in man." In *Why Did you Leave the Horse Alone*, Darwish dwells further on our inner exile, on our loneliness as we seek to live with others, or, better maybe, without them. In *The Mural* he asked again what is mine and what is for the cause, what belongs to me and what is there for the others.

For the cause never leaves him, nor could it, but he was not going to let others define it for him. In 1988, he wrote the PLO's

Palestinian Declaration of Independence, which became the basis of the Palestinian State. He was in Tunis and then in Geneva as Arafat officially recognized Israel and UN resolution 242. He was a witness to the initiation of the peace process in 1993 and, like many Palestinians, was able to return in 1994. My father too returned to his birth place. I, and many of my generation and younger Palestinians, were also able to go and reside in the West Bank and Gaza to build the institutions of the new independent State, to forge our own personal relation with Palestine, meet the larger family, create new friends, discover the undulated olive tree hills, the warmth of the Mediterranean sea and the shine of Jerusalem and other cities.

But it remained always a question as to what and where we were returning. Israel, who refused Darwish's return after he left in 1969, welcomed him in 1994. But he received no Israeli ID and had no sovereign Palestinian passport. He thus could not, in principle, be inside Israeli 1948 borders, in his native village or where he used to live. The Oslo peace process defined the limits of his, and other Palestinians', mobility within the confines of the Palestinians autonomy, a fragmented territory over less than 22% of historic Palestine, within an anatomized West Bank and Gaza segmented by barred wires and eight meter high wall. He opened a house in Ramallah and started again to oscillate between it, Jordan and Paris. Palestine, the struggle for a Palestinian State, seemed not simply to continue to unfold as a tragedy; it was risking of becoming a farce. Israel refused to retreat from the land it occupied, and the Palestinian leadership was unable to alter the deep unequal power structure it entered with it. The International community watched again, refusing to hold Israel accountable to international law while alleviating its sense of guilt by pouring billions of dollars to the Palestinians in an attempt to prevent them from starvation.

Darwish refused to be part of this process of trivialization of the Palestinian cause.

Palestine is not a humanitarian problem, as he and Arafat reminded us in the late 1960s. It is a political struggle. It still remains the issue today because it remains an anti-colonial struggle that has not been resolved. It is the epic of the victim of the eternal victim. It is ever present because it accentuates the unresolved relation between the East and the West, the "us" and "them," the "one" and the "other." Darwish often reminded us of entangled relation with the "other," of the Israeli who oppresses, dispossesses, and kills, but who also loves, as his early poem "Between Rita and Me is a Rifle" already said, who is also trapped with the Palestinian as his "Ready Scenario" explains, who can only reach her humanity by giving up its power.

Darwish died before he saw the latest Israeli war on Gaza. He had already witnessed the disarray of the Palestinian leadership, and the immunity with which Israeli violation of international law has been received by the international community. He despaired but did not give up. As he said in his last recital and postmortem volume, *I Do Not Want for This Poem to End*. As much as he remained attached to life he remained attached to Palestine, but he was aware that it is "for another poet to complete the scenario that is still unfinished." As I grieve his loss, submerge myself in his latest volume, I wonder what my generation and the one after me will do. I know though that Palestine remains the quintessential human struggle for dignity, justice and humanity and this is why it remains alive.

*As he so beautifully reminds us:
We have on this earth what makes life
worth living:
On this earth, the lady of earth,
Mother of all beginnings
Mother of all ends.
She was called... Palestine.
She came to be called ... Palestine.
My Lady, because you are my Lady,
I am worthy of life*