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Mahmoud Darwish

Hope as Home in the Eye of the Storm

ASHWANI SAITH

*They can't break or occupy my words!**We do not seek to be victims, nor do we seek to be heroes — all that we want is to be ordinary.*

Mahmoud Darwish is a poet, the national poet of the non-existent state of Palestine, and the voice of a silenced people who are homeless at home and refugees in their own country. He also has the unquestioned stature of an Arab poet of the first rank. "Many people in the Arab world feel their language is in crisis; and it is no exaggeration to say that Mahmoud is considered a saviour of the Arab language," says Subhi Hadidi, the Syrian poetry critic. At his readings in Cairo or in Damascus, Darwish draws people in the thousands, though he has said, "I like being in the shadows, not in the light." At one recent reading in Beirut, over 25,000 people turned up in a football stadium. Inevitably, the audience included doctors and workers, housewives and professionals, taxi drivers and academics. This wide appeal and intense bond between the poet and his people goes beyond ephemeral politics or literary fashion, and is rooted in the ongoing upheavals, exclusions, and oppressions that are being so widely experienced in contemporary times in the region, but above all, in occupied Palestine.

Fiercely independent, Darwish has continually struggled for the Palestinian homeland. He remains an implacable opponent of the Israeli occupation. But he, like the late Edward Said, is also scathingly critical of an Arab continent "fast asleep under repressive regimes," where soccer seems to have replaced Palestine as the Arab passion.² As a poet, he is critically acknowledged for the sheer beauty and technical virtuosity of his work. Its power lies in its lyrical simplicity, musicality, beauty, and literary quality. Although recognised as a Palestinian poet, he does not wish to gain praise arising from any motive of solidarity; even in the late 1960s he wrote, "we want you to judge us as poets, not as resistance poets."

The identity of a poet

The identity of Darwish as a poet, however, is inextricably entwined with that of the struggles of the Palestinian people. Living as a poet in a state of human bondage, his creativity, his imagination, and the images and meanings that his words carry, are all mortgaged to the reality of Palestinian "unfreedom." His poetry, with its inseparably interwoven themes of love and struggle, is itself manifestly a hostage to this incarceration. When I first read his justly famous gentle lines to his mother, I must confess that each thought, phrase, string of words, came to me as a yearning for the caressing embrace of Home.

*I long for my mother's bread
My mother's coffee
Her touch
...
And if I come back one day
Take me as a veil to your eyelashes
Cover my bones with the grass
Blessed by your footsteps
Bind us together
With a lock of your hair*

*With a thread that trails from the back of your dress
...
I am old
Give me back the star maps of childhood
So that I
Along with the swallows
Can chart the path
Back to your waiting nest.*

[extract]

Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish was the recipient of the Prince Claus Fund Principal Award for 2004. The ISIM, in cooperation with the Prince Claus Fund, Bak, and the NCDO, organized a poetry reading in Amsterdam at 29 November 2004. Indian economist Ashwani Saith introduced Darwish and pondered on the meaning of his poetry to migrants and people everywhere.¹

And so it surely must have spoken to every Palestinian, or any other of a mother born. Ironically, in contrast to the feelings his words evoke, Darwish laments: "Sometimes I feel as if I am read before I write. When I write a poem about my mother, Palestinians think my mother is a symbol for Palestine. But I write as a poet, and my mother is my mother. She's not a sym-

bol. "Mother" was a poet writing a simple confession that he loves his mother, but it became a collective song. All my work is like that. I don't decide to represent anything except myself. But that self is full of collective memory." For Darwish, the search is for freedom from this handcuffing of the poetic imagination as much as his life: "The subject of occupation itself becomes a burden," he says in anger. "I want, both as a poet and as a human being, to free myself from Palestine. But I can't. When my country is liberated, so shall I be."³

His poetry gives power to the tired and forlorn, to revive, restore, and relive the imagined mobile space called home; to feeling the pain of being cut to the quick by the jagged mirrors of memory, to excavating emotions put away and buried in long-locked caskets. It is a poetry of loss, of desolation, of doomed efforts, but significantly also of truth, hope, reconciliation. On an open palm, Darwish offers a key. The dehumanizing of the other in the imagination can perhaps be all too easily explained or condoned in the context of the lives that are being sucked into the vicious vortex of violence. But even while Darwish recognises the long roots of anger, irrigated red by each new cycle of suppression, he also transcends these barricades, without denying them or making them invisible, through a simultaneous recognition of the mutuality of traumas, confusions, as also of mutual aspirations of coexistence and peace.

In bidding farewell to Edward Said, his age-long friend, fellow traveller, and visionary, Darwish returned to the early days: "time was less wild then ... We both said: if the past is only an experience, make of the future a meaning and a vision ... Let us go into tomorrow trusting the candour of imagination ..."⁴ The idealism persists. Darwish takes a brave stand for dialogue—for standing up, facing, engaging, embracing the understandings, perceptions, perspectives of the other—for the washing away of the gruesome grime of violence and the now-blackened congealed stains of hurt through a mutual recognition of truths in the full glare of the denied rights and recent history of the Palestinians. The case for the Palestinian homeland must be comprehended and accepted through such osmosis. Not many have walked this difficult path.

Several of Mahmoud Darwish's books have been translated into Hebrew, and he has written several tender nuanced portraits of his Jewish friends and lovers. In March 2000, the Israeli education minister proposed that some of his works be included as an optional part of the multi-cultural school curriculum—but Israeli polity was adamantly hostile and apparently not ready to open Israeli youth to the words of the other. When Israeli occupation forces ransacked the Sakakini Cultural Centre, from where he edits the highly regarded quarterly literary review *Al-Karmel*, his and his fellow poets' manuscripts were trampled under foot. "I know they are strong and can invade and kill anyone. But they can't break or occupy my words." His is the defiant voice of the silenced that can be heard above the chatter of politicians and the clatter of gunfire.

Recently, Mahmoud Darwish organized a delegation of eminent writers, including some Nobel laureates such as Wole Soyinka, to visit Palestine and see for themselves the realities of the occupation. This is how he ended his welcome address to them in Ramallah: "We have an incurable malady: hope. Hope in liberation and independence. Hope in a normal life where we are neither heroes nor victims. Hope that our children will go safely to their schools. Hope that a pregnant woman will give birth to a living baby, at the hospital, and not a dead child in front of a military checkpoint; hope that our poets will see the beauty of the colour red in roses rather than in blood; hope that this land will take up its original name: the land of love and peace..."

The universal appeal of the poet and Laureate

The Prince Claus Fund in the Netherlands bestowed their Principal Award for 2004 on Mahmoud Darwish. In selecting Asylum and Migration as the theme for year 2004, the Prince Claus Fund expressed its desire to draw public attention and reflection to the positive contributions of migrants to host societies. Underlying its choice, perhaps, was a latent motivation to challenge the negative labels and images that have recently been imposed by parts of the media and political spectrum on migrant communities in Europe, including the Netherlands. At present, xenophobic and Islamophobic prejudices are increasingly being purveyed as pseudo political commentaries. In parts of Europe girls wearing headscarves can with impunity be denied entry into a restaurant, shameful targets are being set by governments for the annual deportation of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants whose cheap labour is openly exploited in the economy in full public gaze, and politicians who declare Islam to be an intrinsically retarded faith are lionized and have their statues put up in city centres.

In words which could well reflect the sentiments of Prince Claus himself, the Prince Claus Fund declares that in making its awards, "special attention is paid to what are called zones of silence, areas where people are deprived by political or economic circumstances of the opportunity for free cultural expression." The hapless Palestinian people are trapped in such a zone of silence; a silence broken only by the spiteful spitting of guns that kill, by the snarling of tanks that crush, by vengeful slogans for mutual retribution, and by the refrain of mourning mothers and the wailing of fresh widows. In this deafening, despairing zone of silence, to what does one turn for recovering the self and re-humanizing the other? To poetry, says Mahmoud Darwish: "Poetry and beauty are always making peace. When you read something beautiful you find coexistence; it breaks walls down..."⁵

Yet who am I to write about Mahmoud Darwish, this poet of the first rank? What temerity, what presumptuousness from one who has not published a single line of verse. I speak with the soul of one about whom Darwish writes, to whom his words come alive as if he were whispering them in my ear, notwithstanding that irrelevant geographical detail that I am an Indian, not Muslim, and illiterate in Arabic. The Palestinian camps are as old as I, and I wonder how, and how long, I might have survived there. My parents were themselves refugees, subjects of an early episode of ethnic cleansing, so I was conceived in Lahore in Pakistan but born in Delhi, one of midnight's children. They were in the prime of their youth then. Now they are fragile octogenarians, still hankering, moist-eyed, after that Lahore that they loved and remember, and that was and remains "home" to this day. Likewise, nearly half a century later, my Kashmiri wife, her elderly parents, and family have all been cleansed out of their home and homeland, the valley of Kashmir, that heaven on earth that daily endures unearthly forms of hell. Since that time, the countries and peoples of the sub-continent have not been kind to each other, and whole populations have



PHOTO BY BASSEM AZZAWI, 2004

been wrenched from their roots and thrown one way or another and the upheavals continue apace. The African continent, alas, illustrates a parallel experience on a panoramic scale. New places become, or must become, home; and old homes become, or must be made to become, memories like fading, cherished photographs. But few of these transformations have been voluntary. Violence, homelessness, the loss of identity, the struggle for survival where life is demolished and has to be reconstructed each day in the eternal quest for the holy grail that is dignity: unfortunately but unquestionably, this condition of denial afflicts large swathes of populations. Darwish speaks of, to, and for, this lost estate of humanity. "Exile is more than a geographical concept. You can be an exile in your homeland, in your own house, in a room. It's not simply a Palestinian question."

Mahmoud Darwish, you are right! Eternal exile, who ticket-less travels the worlds, your imagination your wings, invisibly defying fortified borders, with no identity card, no gleaming polymerized passport, with little more than your scribbled verse as your visa—Mahmoud Darwish, you are so right!

*I come from There and remember...
I have learned and dismantled all the words
to construct a single one: Home*

**Poetry reading
by Mahmoud
Darwish,
Amsterdam,
29 November
2004**

Notes

1. A slightly different version of this article was published under the title, "Hope as Home in the Eye of the Storm: A Tribute to Mahmoud Darwish Recipient of the Prince Claus Fund's Principal Award for 2004," in *Prince Claus Fund Journal*, no.11:37-42.
2. Maya Jaggi, "Poet of the Arab World: Mahmoud Darwish," *Guardian*, June 8, 2002.
3. Spoken to William Dalrymple, see *Guardian*, G2, October 2, 2002.
4. In one of their conversations, Said exhorts Darwish: "Now, don't forget: If I die before you, my will is the impossible!" in Mahmoud Darwish, "Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading," trans. Mona Anis, *al-Ahram Weekly*, September 30, 2004, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/print/2004/710/cu4.htm>.
5. Says Darwish, who advocates dialogue with Israelis, "I always humanize the other. I even humanized the Israeli soldier. I will continue to humanize even the enemy ..." cf. "A Soldier Who Dreams of White Lilies," written just after the 1967 war.

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