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Unearthing Literature: The Case of Hussein Barghouti

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Conclusion

The previous four chapters provided literary analysis of some aspects of Barghouti's poetics. The main aim of the dissertation was to weave together the personal (life-death), the thematic (language, land, ritual), and the literary and theoretical. In this way, Barghouti's work exemplifies how the literary stands as a strong signpost for historical, social, and political shifts. The dissertation charted his strong position on overused and fixed terms, concepts, and themes in Palestinian and Arabic literature. It, furthermore, showed how Barghouti's questions and acts of innovation are trials of a style of writing and a way of thinking that have become very influential in contemporary Palestinian literature. The argument put forth is that Barghouti is an initiator of generic and thematic transgressions and an advocate of the dialectics of form and formation as exemplified in the acts of movement which are explored in these chapters.

The difficulty in mapping Barghouti's ideas in an 'organized' manner is due in large part to his use of difficult language, the heavy intertextuality and allusions, and the quick movement of ideas. Space, language, myth, and body are constant features in all of his works, and the call for renewal and defamiliarization is, for lack of a better word, representative of his writing. The dissertation itself played on the dialectics of form and formation, as its structure allows for a categorization of themes according to the chronology of Barghouti's life. The sequential movement from childhood, to death, and then to after-life was then deconstructed within each chapter through the theoretical prisms of beginning, space, and myth and ritual, respectively.

Chapter 1 set the scene for the ensuing close-reading chapters. It introduced six critical issues deemed central to Barghouti's poetics. Using the body as a frame, the six issues exemplified Barghouti's call for moving beyond familiar modes of expression. The freedom of the body from any social, political, or personal constraints is directly connected to the

freedom of language and artistic expression. Although most of the excerpts in the dissertation were taken from Barghouti's poetry and autobiographies, other texts such as his *Hajar al-ward* and his works of criticism mark an important step in Palestinian criticism: they reveal a deep engagement with the products of his time, an influence of Arabic and Western literary and social criticism, and most importantly, a literary vision that was based on destroying the reliance on a fixed reference (*marji 'iyya*). It is from these works that the six terms were borrowed to guide the reading of Barghouti's literary works, an exercise that attests to the natural ties between criticism and literature.

Chapter 2 looked at language through the prism of beginnings. Barghouti defines a beginning as "an initial absence of the presupposed."⁶³⁹ Taking cues from Said and Lyotard, the chapter presented the processes of language construction as based on continuations and breaks. The chapter interrogated the connections between memory and imagination, and the dynamic relation between the author and the reader, and presented three registers of language (pre-language, language, and post-language). The aim was to show how Barghouti's approach to language mirrors the personal and communal realities but steps further into reshaping them, as demonstrated in the examples from *Laylā wa Tawba*. The examples from Barghouti's own childhood and that of his son reveal Barghouti's transformation of his personal exclusion and his attempt at reconfiguring his nearing death.

Chapter 3 honed in on the concept of space and took Barghouti's confrontation with illness and death as its starting point. Augé's distinction between place and non-place, the notion of the 'monument,' and the links between space and illness were utilized to frame Barghouti's understanding of space. Geographic space, as represented by the land, and poetic space, as represented by genres and literary techniques, are influenced by movements that rediscover their political, social, and artistic meanings. Even at times of severe illness, pain,

⁶³⁹ "...غياب أولي للمفترض" Barghouti, "al-Anā wa al-makān," 70.

and estrangement, literature still functions as a producer of meanings and metaphors. Space, for Barghouti, represents a stage for political commentaries and literary challenges. It is understood as a network of power relations and possibilities (*imkāniyyāt*).

Chapter 4 began with exploring ‘myth’ as a theme in Barghouti’s writings. Myths (with their narrations, archetypes, and symbolism) entail a sense of familiarity. Benefitting from the rich research on the interconnections between myths and rituals, this chapter adopted rituals, as bodily acts, over myths, as completed narrations, as a way of reading Barghouti’s poetics. The examples from “Inānnā,” “Jazz sharqī,” and *Marāya sā’ila* presented the rituals of reversal, transgression, and metamorphosis which acknowledge the known structures of the myth of Inanna and that of poetic writings, but question them. These interplays with the fixed structures attest to Barghouti’s awareness of his literary heritage, his aim at presenting uncharted literary connections, and at inviting the reader to discover familiar stories and formats anew. The example from *Sa’akūn* reinstalls the political urgency in the life and writings of Barghouti. The ritual of metamorphosis becomes a tool for establishing connections with the land that are open for future explorations.

The three chapters, in sum, described shifts and movements that disrupt the fixed and point to discovery in modes of expression. The body in this dissertation is both a theme and a methodology. Its importance to Barghouti’s personal life is profound, from growing up in the mountains and discovering nature and stories through bodily senses to witnessing the changes of his body due to his illness. Methodologically, the body is a stage for reading changes in the physical body and geographical and political shifts in the national and political body (the land), and for challenging common forms and genres of writing. The body as a lens allows us to see how the lived, the sensed, and the experienced are captured in Barghouti’s writings. Rather than deeming the material secondary, the body highlights their role in the creation of the reflexive, the philosophical, and the cognitive.

There are many reasons for the growing interest in Barghouti's literature, particularly after his death in 2002. Many of the poets and writers who Barghouti mentored, some of whom had begun publishing more starting from the 1990s, represent the contemporary generation of Palestinian writers. Shifts in Palestinian literature towards elevating the marginal and the psychological and questioning the typical ways of documenting the political in life⁶⁴⁰ meant that Barghouti's works started gaining more academic as well as public attention.⁶⁴¹ The Palestinian writer Akram Musallam, for example, narrates his encounters with tanks and soldiers and the murder of children during the first Intifada. He, furthermore, contours the tension between personal and political life during the post-Oslo era through the lens of his favourite sweets from childhood (*al-ḥalqūm*). Towards the end of the piece, Musallam recalls Barghouti's advice to him: "you go to the ends of the world searching for creativity. What you need, instead, is to train yourself to discover the aesthetic in the ashtay that lies in front of you."⁶⁴² The sweets become Musallam's way of expressing the political through the personal and the minuscule, against the backdrop of the grandiose political situation.

Barghouti's influence can be seen in multiple works, for example in dedications⁶⁴³ that make him a participant in the formation of the new literary text, as Gérard Genette argues. Besides paratextual⁶⁴⁴ attention, Barghouti is adapted into an intertextual figure where mentioning his name invokes a set of images and provides him with a different form of

⁶⁴⁰ For more on this see Rahman, *In the Wake of the Poetic*, 1-29.

⁶⁴¹ Al-Shaikh presents in his article the shifts in the representations of 'heroism' in the cultural scene in Palestine after the Oslo agreement. In it, he alludes to the role that Barghouti, amongst other poets such as Zakariyya Muhammad, played on the upcoming generation of poets and authors in the '90s. These authors include: Maḥmūd Abū-Hashhash, Akram Musallam, 'Āṭif Abū-Sayf, and Ashraf al-Zaghal. For more on the changes in the cultural scene after Oslo, see Abdul-Rahim al-Shaikh, "Taḥawwulāt al-Buṭūla fī al-khiṭāb al-thaqāfī al-Filasṭīnī," *Majallat al-Dirāsāt al-Filasṭīniyya*, 96 (Autumn 2013): 73-95.

⁶⁴² "أنت تذهب إلى أقصى الأرض بحثاً عن الإبداع، وما تحتاجه هو أن تتدرب على اكتشاف الجمالي في منفضة السجائر التي أمامك على الطاولة!"

Akram Musallam, "Indama aṭ'amanī Shimon Perez ḥalqūman," *Majallat al-Dirāsāt al-Filasṭīniyya* 96 (Autumn 2013): 143.

⁶⁴³ See for example Kifāḥ Fannī, "Qadar akīd," 199-202, and Jihād Hudayb, "Ḥussayn al-Barghūthī- Ṣawtuk al-ajash ṣafā wa raqq," *al-Karmel*, no. 76-77 (July 2003): 131-133. *al-Karmel*, no. 76-77 (July 2003): 131-133.

⁶⁴⁴ See Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Genette provides a section on dedications as example of paratexts. See pages 117-143.

existence. This is seen in one of Ghassān Zaqtān's poems "You're not Alone in the Wilderness."⁶⁴⁵

You're Not Alone in the Wilderness

In Star Mountain, by the woods, the wizard will stop me

by a passage for boats with black masts

where the dead sit before dawn in black garments and straw
masks

a passage for the birds

where white fog swims and gates open in the brush

and someone talking down the slope

and bells are heard and the rustles of flapping wings

resembling the forest passing over the mountain and nicking
the night!

...and peasants, fishermen and hunters, and awestruck
soldiers, Moabite,

Assyrian, Kurd, Mamluk, Hebraic with claims

from Egypt, Egyptians on golden chariots, nations

from white islands, Persians with black turbans,

and idolater-philosophers bending the reeds

and Sufis seeking the root of ailment...

the flapping of wings drags the forest towards the edges of
darkness!

...

In Star Mountain, by the woods,

⁶⁴⁵ Ghassān Zaqtān, "You're Not Alone in the Wilderness," trans. Fady Joudah, in *This Week in Palestine* 227 (March 2017), 14-15.

I will hear a familiar old voice
my father's voice throwing dice towards me
or Malek's
as he tows a blond horse behind him in his elegy
or the voice of Hussein Barghouthi
laid to rest beneath almond trees
as he instructed in the text
And my voice:
You're not alone in the wilderness!

In the poem, Barghouthi's name positions him at the intersection between familiarity and wilderness. It invites back the laying of his body among the almond trees, as he dictates in his last autobiography. Barghouthi is mentioned in the context in which he felt most comfortable, that of the 'unknowns' (the fishermen and hunters) and those who come from all walks of life (the Kurd, the peasants, the philosophers). He is set in the context of familiarity and adventure (wilderness), the unknown and the historical, the spatial and the temporal. In short, he is set in his own poetic conceptions of openness and discovery.

I would like to conclude by echoing Barghouthi's statement at the beginning of his dissertation that "every 'conclusion' is on the road, not at the end."⁶⁴⁶ It is this sense of incompleteness and constant pursuit of other possibilities, experiences, and perspectives that colour Barghouthi's writings and life. Following this initial exercise at charting some of his central ideas in his writing and showing his awareness and engagement with Palestinian life and its literary scene, further research is needed to read Barghouthi in relation to other literary

⁶⁴⁶ Barghouthi, "The Other Voice," 24.

productions.⁶⁴⁷ A line of inquiry that I would like to follow is the relation between criticism and literary works. How can one distil insights from critical and literary works and apply them theoretically to the reading of other literary texts? Beyond the analysis of Barghouti's works, how can his literary and critical notions be used as tools for exploration? In this way, literature becomes a self-questioning field that uses all its available tools of criticism and creative writing to come up with new frames of reading. For example, how can the notion of embroidery inform us about the importance, success, and popularity of Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Malhāt* project?⁶⁴⁸

Another approach could be to conduct comparative analysis of Barghouti's works in relation to the many streams of literary influences. An example of this would be a literary analysis that takes Sufi elements such as allusions to Sufi scholars, and the thematic references to light, birds, and journeys as a reading lens, or a theoretical reading that explores intersections and divergences in thought between Barghouti's writings and that of others such as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. Barghouti's interest in multiple disciplines and the large spectrum of influence on his thought and writing opens the space for multi-disciplinary studies that intertwine political economy, literature, philosophy, religion, and mathematics.

The literary in Barghouti's works, as this dissertation has shown, moves into the theoretical as well as the pedagogical. His works propose the making of a theory that is both defined and yet open for redefinition. The embroidery motif, for example, is both a thematic imagery in his texts as well as a poetic proposition on the mechanisms of writing. Barghouti's experience as an academic and a literary author also unpacks pedagogical questions regarding

⁶⁴⁷ Whether these are Palestinian, Arabic, or more global. For instance, it would be interesting to investigate how experiences of divergence and discovery of new ways of political and social representation is presented in other literary examples (for example Indian writing). See for example Ulka Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Different and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁶⁴⁸ For more on Nasrallah, see Nora E. H. Parr, "Inter-textual Nation: Novel Imaginings of Palestinian Community in the Works of Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh," (PhD diss., SOAS, 2016). The *Malhāt* project consists of a series of novels that trace 250 years of the modern history of Palestine.

the relation between teacher and student and the need to break structural systems of education.

In other words, Barghouti's works serve as subject of study as well as a methodological lens that can aid in reading shifts in Palestinian and Arabic writings. His project of transformation compliments the search for a malleable writing sensibility that is aware of its position in regard to changes in society, and is, at the same time, in tune with a vision for new literary and personal discoveries.