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Unearthing Literature: The Case of Hussein Barghouti

Omari, H.

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Author: Omari, H.

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Summary

This dissertation moves beyond the usually imposed representative nature of Palestinian literature by taking the works of the Palestinian author Hussein Barghouti (1954-2002) as a case study. Many of Barghouti's writings were seen as detached, individualistic, and unrelated to the harsh and pressing realities of Palestinian life. The argument that is proposed in this dissertation, however, is that Barghouti's works exemplify a disruption to familiar expressions regarding notions of political engagement, illness and death, and literary innovation. The dissertation adopts the body as a thematic trope and a methodological framework for conceptualizing Barghouti's calls for creative modes of writing and cross-generic experimentations.

Guided by the personal and literary circumstances that shaped Barghouti's life and works, I look at the body through multiple dimensions: the physical body of Barghouti that is being threatened and invaded by cancer, the land of Palestine as it is similarly being threatened and invaded by occupation, and the body of the literary text, where the forms of genres and literary texts are being negotiated and contested. The dissertation uses the relation between the experiential body and the word as a way of investigating alternative modalities of thinking about literature. After setting up the body as the methodological approach of this dissertation in the introduction, chapter 1 positions some of Barghouti's main commentaries in relation to the politicization of Palestinian literature. Furthermore, it asserts Barghouti's conviction of the entanglement between literary criticism and creativity.

The following three chapters are structured chronologically according to the physicality of the body (life/death/after-life) and are respectively titled: Childhood, Death, and Myth. Chapter 2 reads childhood through the apparatus of beginnings. The chapter argues that looking at literary productions as beginnings is a tactic move for innovation. The close-reading of some of Barghouti's autobiographical episodes show how beginnings

extrapolate literary and stylistic breakages that benefit from familial, historical, and linguistic continuities.

Chapter 3 takes death as its starting point for the reading of Barghouti's approach to political engagement, power relations, and literary genres. Death, as an act that performs itself onto the body, allows for an exploration of the body as space. This chapter is concerned with the meaning of movement and how it yields corporeal, literary, and political shifts and changes. Chapter 4 delves into the interplay between myths and rituals. It explores how Barghouti's literary approaches are ritualistic in nature. Rituals are presented as literary acts that Barghouti deploys to empower the corporeal and the literary body with an agency that works beyond representation and familiar modes of writing, and the structural components of myths.

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. However, the notions of beginning, language, land, space, ritual, myth, and body are constant features in all of his works. The body highlights its role in the creation of the reflexive, the philosophical, and the cognitive. The dissertation charts Barghouti's strong position on overused and fixed terms, concepts, and themes in Palestinian and Arabic literature. Furthermore, it shows how his 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.