An Ecopostcolonial Perspective of Home in Mahmoud Darwish’s Poetry

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Abstract: - The notion of home remains central in the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry, who, in his writing life that spans fifty years, writes about his lost homeland from within his country and more keenly so when he is exiled from it. In our reading of his work, the idea of home is closely linked to the question of identity which is fundamental to ecocriticism. The discussion in this paper will focus on how Darwish perceives the notion of home in his poems. The conceptual framework employed is derived from both the postcolonial and the ecocritical theories of reading literature. By explicating the ecopostcolonial perspective of home in Darwish’s poetry, we hope to provide new insights into the waves of Darwish’s use of nature in his homeland, extending what we know of his connection between home and identity that is an important facet of his poetry and the basis for his resistance.

Key-Words: - Home, ecopostcolonial perspective, Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish, poetry

1 Introduction
Palestine and Palestinian home remain at the heart of the poetry of the Arab poet laureate Mahmoud Darwish. Spanning his writing life of fifty years, his poems are marked by a declarative and definitive voice that draws attention to the notion of home primarily as it is closely attached to Palestinian identity. Rahman [1] asserts that the poetry of Darwish is long preoccupied with a reflection of home. This is because he experiences the sense of the loss of home from the very beginning of his life. Alshaer [2] remarks that in 1948, Mahmoud Darwish was six years old when he encountered his first exile due to Israeli occupation of his homeland. He became a refugee from his home that had just started to imprint itself on his imagination. However, such separation from home has given birth to his poetry that speaks of his conception of home and which shows how Darwish utilizes poetry as a means for constituting home among homeless people in the world in general, and in Palestine in particular, through his utilization of nature in his homeland that becomes the basis of his resistance against the occupiers of his home.

Mahmoud Darwish was born in the village of Al-Birwah in the heart of Palestine in 1941. He became a refugee in 1948, when his family was forced to flee from his homeland. In 1949, Darwish and his family came back from Lebanon to live as “internally displaced” refugees in another village in his homeland. Along with more than 750,000 other internally displaced Palestinians who lost homes, possessions and wealth, Darwish experienced being in a state of limbo from 1948 onwards until he was forced to leave again in 1970. With the emergence of Darwish’s poetry in 1958, a rich voice is added to Arabic poetry as well as the Palestinian poetry. He began to compose poems when he was still in school aged seventeen. His poetry prospered during his early poetic stage that spanned twelve years. He lived outside Palestine for about twenty-six years during which his poetry burgeoned noticeably. Indeed, writing from within one’s country and outside of it in Darwish’s circumstance of being displaced and expelled requires further scrutiny. By paying attention to these three stages of Darwish’s writing life, we hope to demonstrate the ways in which he utilizes the images of nature in his motherland to show more keenly the loss of home and the need to regain the lost home.
2 Literature Review

The notion of home is regarded as a very complicated conception and even to many scholars; it cannot be discussed in isolation from the context of diaspora. However, it is also common that one can experience the sense of the loss of home at home. Yusof et al. [3] argue that the concept of home is essential to an individual’s identity. To lose it to another, for any reason, can cause suffering; for it to happen to a child as a consequence of war and violence is an experience that is distressing. As Ruzy Suliza Hashim & Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf [4] have remarked, “traditionally, a home is conceptualised as a stable, physical centre of a person’s private space, a place where one feels belonged and loved. Yet, both the garment that keeps the body private and the home that keeps one safe no longer protect the individual”. This can be applicable in the Palestinian context.

Mahmoud Darwish’s perception of home can be illuminated in three distinctive phases that traversed fifty years of his poetic production. The initial phase covered the first twelve years of his writing life (1958-1970) while he was in Palestine. He experienced the sense of the loss of home even within his homeland. He expressed his longing for home at home when he declares (as cited in Rahman [1]) “home, for we have no home”. The second phase, which was the twenty-six years of his exile, marked his conception of home and exile. Home is no longer constituted by land or people but by the poetic gathering of voices from a distance [1]. The search for Palestinian identity and the sense of homelessness were the vital aspects of Darwish’s poems of exile. Due to the character of his loss, he utilizes nature in his homeland and made it the basis of the connection between the exiled identity and the lost home. In the final phase that covered the last twelve years of his life, the notion of home became a process of articulation constructed through the dialogue with a paternal heritage. In summary, Darwish, who dedicated himself for his homeland defined his poetic work as one of writing home. He once wrote “I learned all the words and how to take them apart so I can form one word, homeland” [5].

His poems illustrate his sense of inseparability with home throughout his writing life. Indeed, his poems portray aspects of Palestinian scenery where Palestinian identity and home are intermingled. Darwish himself declared once (as cited in Celik [6]) that his poems do not deliver mere images and metaphors of Palestinians but convey landscapes, villages, fields and even communicate a place. He added, “I find myself looking at an olive tree, and as I am looking at it, it transforms itself before my eyes into a symbol of our struggle and loss of home” [6]. This statement of Darwish testifies his perception of home that stems from his consideration of his interconnectedness with his lost home. By evoking the concept of association between Palestinians and their homes in Palestine, Darwish articulates his perception of home in the Arab world, the place where he was born, the place he loves and the place he has lost [7]. In this paper, we attempt to explore how Darwish’s poems portray many motifs of home, embodying symbols of interconnectedness of the poet and home. The poems such as “Identity Card”, “the Passport”, “To My Mother”, “To My Father”, “A Lover from Palestine” and “On Perseverance”, A letter from Home”, “ A Diary of A Palestinian Wound”, “ The Land” and “Why did You Leave the Horse Alone” are regarded as the home in Darwish’s viewpoint. That is, the creation of homeland becomes the work of Darwish who once asserted, “The countries between my hands are the work of my hands” [5]. His words articulate that home is indispensable to Darwish’s thoughts and emotions and it serves as an agent that inspires him to produce poems.

3 The Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory, on the one hand, is a well-established model that addresses issues such as the quest for identity, the search for the loss of land, homelessness, resistance and encounter between the colonized and the colonizers. Ecocriticism as a literary theory, on the other hand, is really quite young. It has been developing rapidly since the 1990s, focusing mainly on, as stated by Glotfelty & Fromm [8], “the study of the relationship between humans and the natural world.” Johnson [9] asserts that “ecocriticism has evolved out of many traditional approaches to literature and it is interdisciplinary in nature … where the literary works are viewed in terms of place or environment.” We combine these two theories by linking between the marginality of nature in postcolonial theorizing and the centrism of nature in ecocriticism. The blending of the two theories illuminates the conception of home in Darwish’s poetry using the concept of interconnectedness. Hamoud et al. [10] argue that “interconnectedness is among the most basic of ecocriticism tenets as
ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between humans and nature”. Therefore, this concept involves analyzing the interaction between people and their land and how they are linked reflects the conception of home in Darwish’s poems.

4 The Analysis
Since Darwish’s perception of home has undergone three distinctive stages, the notion of home can be analyzed in three waves:

Wave 1: Darwish’s notion of home at home
In the early poems, Darwish’s perception of home is closely connected to the Palestinian identity through nature. He perceives his home as having an organic bond with people as can be traced clearly in his poems such as “Identity Card”, “The Passport”, “A Lover From Palestine”, and “On Perseverance”. For instance, in the poem “A Lover from Palestine”, interconnectedness between people and land is a major aspect. The title suggests a love relationship between the poet and his country, Palestine. This love shows that he and his motherland, which he metaphorically speaks to as his darling, are inseparable. This poem exemplifies his initial perception of home by focusing on the aspects of nature and the organs of humans in co-existence and are interdependent:

Your eyes are a thorn in my heart
Your words were my song
I saw your face in the walls.
And you are the words of my lips [5]

In the lines above, Darwish transforms the homeland land into an expression of love whose images shape the poet’s sense of home. The different forms of Palestinian nature such as water sources, stones, hills, fields of wheat, flora and fauna, winds, storms, are directly linked with human organs to reveal interdependence. These images propose that land is associated with man to mirror the notion of Darwish’s home. Similarly, in the poem “The Passport”, he says:

Do not ask the trees about their names
Do not ask the valleys about their mother
All the heart of people
Are my nationality
So take away my passport.[5]

These lines show that the trees and valleys know their own origin, just as the speaker himself is assured and confident of his own connection to his home.

Wave 2: Remembering Home from a Distance
Darwish’s poems of exile reflect his constant longing for home. His notion of home remains in its interconnected perception with the Palestinian identity as can be illustrated in his poems of exile such as “A Diary of a Palestinian Wound,” “The Land,” “I Love You or I Do Not Love You,” “Ode to Beirut,” “The Bread” and “I See What I Want”. For instance, the poem “A Diary of a Palestinian Wound” can be regarded as a representative of his poems of exile in which he writes:

Our land and we are one flesh and bone
We are its salt and water
We are its wound, but a wound that fights[5]

The pronoun “we” refers to Palestinians inside and outside Palestine. The image “we are its salt and water” evokes the sense of a bonded relation between Palestinians and their home because salt and water are two important ingredients of seawater that is impossible to separate. The image of “salt and water” conjures the sense of interconnected perception of home from a distance. Home is perceived in the organic image of “we are its wound, but a wound that fights”. However, when salt water is applied to it, it becomes a healing agent. Darwish depicts this image of being “one flesh and bone” to highlight the aching situation when the flesh is removed from the bone that implicitly symbolizes his suffering for being away from home and his sense of homelessness in exile.

In the poem entitled “An Eulogy of High Shadow”, Darwish portrays his home as a bag he is carrying in his exile when declares:

My homeland is a bag
It is my bed at night
My homeland is a bag
I carry it on my shield [5]

The bag metaphor shows the sum total of his whole existence. On the one hand, the bag suggests that he carries the burden of representing the solitary human aspect of struggle in exile. On the other hand, the bag is symbolic of the imaginative home that accompanies him wherever he goes. The image of “I carry it on my shield” indicates his constant effort, the emotional impact, and the mental influence of being aliened from his motherland.

This stanza becomes more insightful when it is read together with his response to a question on the relationship between homeland and exile:
As for me, I cannot praise exile as long as it is impossible to curse the homeland. However, the dreamed Palestine comes to my mind more readily when I write poems than the real Palestine. It is a problem that is at the same time personal and national and that prevents the Israelis from continuing to exile me. This is why I have to write better poems [11].

Wave 3: Home as a Process of Articulation

In the final phase of Darwish’s writing life, his notion of home is ultimately a process of articulation constructed through the association with a parental heritage. This shift in Darwish’s notion of home can be traced in his poems upon returning home such as “Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?”, “At My Mother’s House”, “Do Not Apologize for What You Have Done”, “On the Day Like Today”, “A State of Siege”, “The Stranger’s Picnic”, “Housework”, “Mural”, “The Traveller” and “Nothing but Light”. For instance, Darwish writes in the poem “Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?” which can be the representative poem of his final phase:

I looked upon the trees that guard our nights
I looked upon the winds that protect their homeland
I look upon a procession of ancient prophets as they climb barefoot toward Orshalim
And I ask: is there a new prophet for this new age? [5]

These words reveal that Darwish’s conception of home is closely linked with a parental birthright through nature that he has employed to reflect his loss in the final phase of his poetic production. The ancient prophets whose departure constitutes the notion of home marks the early history of the place. This implies that Darwish’s notion of home is at the level of crisis that demands new prophets and, by extension, new messengers that will continue to fight for the return of the homeland.

Another portrait of home in Darwish’s poems of the final phase of his poetic life can be traced in the poem entitled “At My Mother’s House” when he declares:

In my mother’s house
My photo gazes at me
And does not cease asking:
Are you, my dear guest, me?
Were you once twenty of my years [5]

The image of the photo brings recollection of his youth and how long the years have been since his return. He is now a matured Palestinian whose notion of home has been transformed by the sequence and consequences of the crisis-ridden homeland. Therefore, as he gazes at his lost youth; the photo in turn regards Darwish as the “guest.” This stanza reveals state of being estranged.

Furthermore, in the poem entitled “Mural”, Darwish utilizes the wheat of his homeland to show further his employment of nature to provide new insights for the continuing Palestinian generations. The following stanza emphasizes this assertion:

I am a grain of wheat
That has died to live again
My death makes a new life [5]

The use of the metaphor “I am a grain of land” indicates clearly the intimate attachment with the homeland where he feels renewed and invigorated. Therefore, the ability of the wheat to regenerate is symptomatic of the Palestinian will to remain in existence. In summary, the analysis of the selected poems of Darwish discloses that he remains undeterred in his writing mission. Through an analysis of poems that speak of massive waves of longing for home and which show how Darwish utilized poetry as a means for constituting home among homeless people in the world in general and in Palestine in particular, it is shown that the poet’s employment of nature in his homeland becomes the basis of his agenda as a literary activist.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to explore Mahmoud Darwish’s notion of nature through an ecopostcolonial stance. The analysis of the representative poems displays that Darwish’s conception of home undergoes three influential phases that traverse his writing life of fifty years. We have found that the Palestinian identity is closely linked to the concept of home through his utilization of nature in his homeland, which is, in turn, central to the field of postcolonial ecocriticism we adapted as a new analytical lens for reading the poetry of Darwish in this paper. As it has been made overt, the poems of Darwish are populated with a continuous and unique development in the notion of home from the early poems to the poems of exile and the poems written upon returning home. The twinning loss of identity and home and the combined connection of them in his
works remained at the heart of his productions. In addition, Darwish definitely contributes to the facets of Palestinian identity and stirs up a sense of changing notions of home in the Palestinian context. Undeniably, the ecopostcolonial lens used in this paper opens up new vistas of reading the waves of Darwish’s use of nature in his homeland to reflect his notions of his motherland, extending what we know of his connection between home and identity, and how nature reveals the extent of his loss and his hope for all Palestinians to remember their cause, and to keep faith that Palestine will be recognized as a sovereign state. The recognition of the voice of the colonized subject together with the centrality of nature make ecopostcolonial criticism a useful tool to analyze the concerns of Darwish’s poetry.

References: