



Mahmoud Darwish: Palestine's prophet of humanism

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It is impossible for me to express what I feel about the passing of Mahmoud Darwish. Like many Palestinians, I had grown up reading his poetry in order to express how I feel about whatever significant events happen to Palestinians. I turned to his writings to understand the periods of Palestine's history that happened before I was born. If ever anyone in history deserved the title of a Poet Laureate, it was indeed Darwish, who spoke the mind of his people in a way I doubt anyone has ever been able to do for any other people. Today, I wake up missing my voice. The real travesty of Darwish's death is that it revealed to me that he is no longer there to eloquently express to me how I feel about such travesties.

An often underemphasized aspect of Darwish's life is how he truly lived every single episode of modern Palestinian history, and lived in all the significant locations and periods of Palestinian life. He was born in 1942 in al-Birweh, Galilee, before the Zionist ethnic cleansing of Palestine that made him a refugee in Lebanon in 1948. His father decided to return his family to Palestine in 1949, risking death by Zionist militias that had murdered countless Palestinians who attempted to "escape home." Somehow, Darwish succeeded in returning, and thus lived the years of his youth as a second-class

Israeli citizen. He would then leave to study in the Soviet Union in the early 1970s, joining the growing Palestinian Diaspora in Europe. His political activism led to Israel stripping him of his second-class citizenship, and thus returned him to the ranks of Palestinian refugees and the Diaspora. He would then live in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, getting to savor the experience of the homeless Palestinians wandering across the Arab World.

Darwish witnessed the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon — one of the pivotal points of his life, his poetry and of Palestinian history — and left with the Palestinian resistance on the boats headed to Tunisia. From then on, he lived the quintessential Palestinian nomadic life; the whole world was home for this stateless nomad. In 1995, he finally returned to Palestine with the Palestine Liberation Organization's signing of the Oslo Accords, and attempted to build his life there. He again witnessed another brutal Israeli siege of Palestinians, this time in Ramallah in 2002, which inspired his powerful poetry collection, *'Haalat 'Hisaar* (A State of Siege). Since the 1980s Darwish had serious heart problems, and had a very close encounter with death in 1998 after heart surgery, an experience that inspired his monumental work, *Jidaariyyah* (Mural).

Throughout all these episodes of Palestinian history, Darwish was there, the voice of the voiceless Palestinians to the world. His peerless poetry and striking emotion were enormously successful in drawing world attention to the plight of Palestinians, galvanizing Palestinian to their cause, and rallying millions of Arabs around the cause. All the countless millions spent on public relations campaigns by the Israeli Foreign Ministry were never a match to any of Darwish's powerful poems.

For me, the most striking and admirable aspect of Darwish's poetry is how it remained so resolutely humanist and universalist in its message. Never did Darwish succumb to cheap nationalism and chauvinism; never did he resort to vilification of his oppressors or the usual jingoism so common in political art and literature. Never did he forget that his oppressor too is human, just like him. The magnanimity, forgiveness and humanism he exhibited in his work remain the ultimate credit to this great author.

Throughout ethnic cleansing, living as a second-class citizen, being placed under house arrest, having his second-class citizenship revoked, being chased and hounded from one exile to another, being bombed in almost each of these exiles and living under countless sieges, Darwish's humanism never succumbed. One of his most popular poems, Rita, spoke of his love for a Jewish Israeli woman by that name; and about the absurdity of wars coming between lovers. This poem was made into a popular song by Lebanese musician Marcel Khalife.

In his powerful 2002 poem, "A State of Siege," written during the Israeli siege of Ramallah, after talking of the sixth sense that allows him to skillfully escape shells, Darwish takes time to address the very Israeli soldiers shelling his neighborhood:

You, standing at the doorsteps, come in
And drink with us our Arabic coffee
For you may feel that you are human like us;

To the killer: If you had left the fetus thirty days,
Things would've been different:
The occupation may end, and the toddler may not

remember the time of the siege,
and he would grow up a healthy boy,
and study the Ancient history of Asia,
in the same college as one of your daughters.
And they may fall in love.
And they may have a daughter (who would be Jewish by
birth).
What have you done now?
Your daughter is now a widow,
and your granddaughter is now orphaned?
What have you done to your scattered family,
And how could you have slain three pigeons with the
one bullet?

Darwish's last poem, published a few weeks before his death, tells the fascinating tale of falling into one hole with one's enemy. Darwish explores the dynamic of enemies facing a common plight; how the past is remembered and yet forgotten when they cooperate to murder a snake; how instinct triumphs over ideology and how a common plight makes the concept of enmity absurd. In a pretty accurate description of the current plight of Palestinians and Israelis, and in a very ominous phrase indicating that Darwish felt his impending death, he concludes:

He said: Would you negotiate with me now?
I said: For what would you negotiate me now,
in this grave-hole?
He said: On my share and your share of this common grave
I said: What use is it?
Time has passed us,
Our fate is an exception to the rule
Here lie a murderer and the murdered, sleeping in one hole

And it remains for another poet to take this scenario to its end!

But for me, the most memorable of Darwish's work will always remain his seminal poem, "Madeeh al-Thill al-'Aaly" (In Praise of the High Shadow). The poem was written on the deck of one of the ships carrying Darwish, along with thousands of Palestinian fighters, from Beirut to Tunisia after Israel's barbaric destruction of Lebanon in 1982. Darwish recounts the daily realities of living under shelling and under siege in Beirut, the deafening silence of the rest of the world towards the plight of the Palestinians and Lebanese, and the harrowing details of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Acerbic, witty and powerful, Darwish skewers everyone from the Israeli government murdering civilians while pretending to be the victim ("You stole our tears, wolf"), to the American government ("The Plague") giving every child a cluster bomb toy as a gift, to the Arab governments ("the bastard nations") who refrain from doing anything to help their Palestinian brethren, and instead resort to pathetic anti-Semitic rhetoric to deflect attention away from their ineptitude.

Yet through it all, and as dark as the plight becomes, Darwish never loses sight of the humanism at the heart of his cause and at the heart of the Palestinian struggle. He continuously disparages nationalism and mocks its silliness. The ending of the poem, in particular, serves as a sort of Palestinian anti-Zionist humanist manifesto. In it, Darwish addresses the Palestinian fighter with powerful rhetorical questions, asking him about the true nature of his cause, and what he is really after. Mocking the trappings of nationalism and statehood, Darwish — in no uncertain terms — asserts that the cause has always been about humans, about freedom from oppression, about the revolution against

persecution, about the lofty ideals of liberty, and most definitely not about petty nationalism and the toys of statehood:

It is for you to be, or not to be,
It is for you to create, or not to create.
All existential questions, behind your shadow, are a farce,
And the universe is your small notebook, and you are its
creator.
So write in it the paradise of genesis,
Or do not write it,
You, you are the question.
What do you want?
As you march from a legend, to a legend?
A flag?
What good have flags ever done?
Have they ever protected a city from the shrapnel of a
bomb?
What do you want?
A newspaper?
Would the papers ever hatch a bird, or weave a grain?
What do you want?
Police?
Do the police know where the small earth will get
impregnated from the coming winds?
What do you want?
Sovereignty over ashes?
While you are the master of our soul; the master of our
ever-changing existence?
So leave,
For the place is not yours, nor are the garbage thrones.
You are the freedom of creation,
You are the creator of the roads,

And you are the anti-thesis of this era.
And leave,
Poor, like a prayer,
Barefoot, like a river in the path of rocks,
And delayed, like a clove.

You, you are the question.
So leave to yourself,
For you are larger than people's countries,
Larger than the space of the guillotine.
So leave to yourself,
Resigned to the wisdom of your heart,
Shrugging off the big cities, and the drawn sky,
And building an earth under your hand's palm — a tent, an
idea, or a grain.
So head to Golgotha,
And climb with me,
To return to the homeless soul its beginning.
What do you want?
For you are the master of our soul,
The master of our ever-changing existence.
You are the master of the ember,
The master of the flame.
How large the revolution,
How narrow the journey,
How grand the idea,
How small the state!

Darwish's legacy will live on as eternally as his ultimate triumph against his oppressors: he never let them succeed in making him dehumanize them. In spite of living through the full gamut of Zionist oppression and the Palestinian plight, in spite of all the

murders, the sieges, the shelling, the racism and the oppression, Zionism never succeeded in turning Darwish into a racist, and never succeeded in making Darwish hate his fellow human. His humanism shone through as his ultimate triumph, and the ultimate insult to the chauvinist, parochial, racist and criminal Zionist project to which he was the quintessential antithesis.

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