ECO-MEMORIES IN MAHMOUD DARWISH’S POETRY: AN ECOCRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF MEMORY FOR FORGETFULNESS

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ABSTRACT

Memory for Forgetfulness is a collection of prose poems written in exile by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. This paper examines the manifestations of nature in Darwish’s memories of the homeland he left behind. The premise of this paper is based on the view that Darwish utilizes nature as a form of resistance in his poetry (Hamoud, 2013); poignantly, it becomes a means of recollecting and illuminating the various aspects of the Palestinian condition. Using ecocriticism as a lens, we attempt to provide an ecocritical interpretation of Darwish’s Memory for Forgetfulness which comprises the poet’s homeward memories of the fauna and flora that speak of their under siege conditions but whose spirits remain unbroken. The analysis highlights the different facets of the eco-memories through varied human-nature interplay in the poems and the aspects through which these interactions in return present images of a once-free Palestine and how it will liberate itself again. The focus on green memories in this paper provides insights into a deeper understanding of the human condition via the environment that has shaped Darwish’s poetry and his struggle to raise consciousness of the Palestinian plight.

JEL Classifications: Z120
Keywords: Eco-memories, ecocriticism, nature, poetry, Mahmoud Darwish
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INTRODUCTION

Memory for Forgetfulness is a collection of prose poems written in exile by the Palestinian poet laureate Mahmoud Darwish. To varying degrees, Palestine and its memories remained at the heart of Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry written during his exile. In fact, by utilizing nature as a means of homeland memories, Darwish’s poems are intimately connected to Palestine from which he was displaced for about twenty-six years. His memories of the homeland were an effective means in the political mobilization of Palestinians in the years of exile from 1970 until 1995. Bassam K. Frangieb (2008:11) remarks, “Mahmoud Darwish has indeed played a leading role in his political commitment to Arab national causes and in enriching the modern Arab poetics as a whole”. With the emergence of Darwish and his outstanding and extensive writing over a span of twenty-six years, an immensely rich voice of homeland memories was added to the Arabic poetry in general and the Palestinian poetry in particular. Najat Rahman (2008:41) asserts, “As a poet of exile, Darwish’s poetry has long been preoccupied with a reflection on home”. Furthermore, Darwish’s homeland nature, to a large extent, provides him with myriad signposts of memories from a distance. Therefore, the current paper is intended to present some insights into the various facets of Darwish’s memories of his homeland through his use of nature. Using ecocriticism as a lens, we attempt to provide an ecocritical interpretation of Darwish’s Memory for Forgetfulness which comprises the poet’s homeward memories in exile.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Memory for Forgetfulness is a collection of prose poems written by the Palestinian poet laureate Mahmoud Darwish. It details Darwish’s memories of the homeland from which he is displaced. It also presents the depiction of Beirut’s situation during the Israeli invasion of 1982. For two months, from June to August 1982, Beirut the Lebanese city of beauty and peace was besieged by the Israeli forces. Meanwhile, Darwish manages to live within the crucial moments of the besieged city in order to produce such a vivid memorial collection of poetry. Memory for Forgetfulness represents the memories of the poet’s homeland occupation as well as the Israeli invasion and besiege of Beirut in 1982 as a reaction to the presence of the Palestinian resistance
leadership and its nationalist Lebanese allies in Beirut. Darwish was living in the besieged city of Beirut and witnessed the event and recorded its details with a passionate commitment and stored them in his strong visual memory for the future. Three years later, Darwish recollected that single day on the streets of the invaded city of Beirut which was besieged from land, air and sea. He also remembered the occupied homeland he left behind and visualized it in his Memory for Forgetfulness.

In his introduction to the collection of Memory for Forgetfulness, Ibrahim Muhawi (1982: xv) remarks, “extraordinary conditions foreground the ordinary, and the heroic consists in living every moment to the full”. From his residence in Paris, Darwish showed that he was able to relive the homeland moments and produced a vivid and haunting record of such memories. Mirroring the various aspects of his homeland nature, he succeeded in presenting human conditions and the lives of Palestinians via the various forms of the homeland environment. To him, poetry in exile means to keep alive the memory and to represent homeland in your everyday writing. Therefore, using ecocriticism as a lens, the current paper is an attempt to explore the manifestation of the different facets of the poet’s homeward memories via nature in his memorial collection entitled Memory for Forgetfulness.

The Palestinian laureate poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) is regarded the loudest voice of the Palestinian memories whose stark poetic writing details the displacement and suffering of the Palestinian people. He produced more than twenty collections of poetry which have been translated into many languages all over the world. He remained, exceptionally, the Arab world’s best-selling. Darwish was born in 1941 in Al-Birwah, a small beautiful village in the Acre region. His family had to flee to the neighboring country, Lebanon, although they returned in the following year. He started to produce poetry while he was still a teenager and soon made fame as a poet of Palestinian resistance. His first collection of poetry, Wingless birds, was published in 1960. He was arrested and imprisoned by the Israeli occupation forces many times for reciting “inciting poems of resistance” among the people of his locality. Hence, Darwish was forced to leave his homeland in 1970 and travelled to many countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia and France. He joined the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1973 and became close to its leader Yasser Arafat. He was elected to the PLO’s executive committee and it was Darwish who wrote the declaration of Palestinian independence of 1988 read out by Arafat when he proclaimed the state of Palestine. He returned to stay in Ramallah after the signing of Oslo Accords in 1993 between PLO and Israel, but he had expressed his opposition to the accords and left PLO’s executive committee in protest (Naqqash 1996).

ECOCRITICISM AS A LENS

Ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary lens for scrutinizing the relationship between literature and environment, has been growing dramatically in the scene of literary studies and criticism since 1990 (Johnson, 2009). It travelled beyond British and American shores to other places such as India, Africa, South East Asia and many countries all over the world. In India, for instance, an increasing body of works applying ecocritical approaches for analyzing the texts that depict a range of engagements with environment (Shikha, 2011). In South Asia, notable ecocritical studies have been conducted recently particularly in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and China. The recent edited book entitled East Asian Ecocriticisms: A Critical Reader (2013) is a vital guide to the East Asian ecocriticism in the recent decade.

In Arabic literary studies, however, “ecocriticism is still in its infancy” (Hamoud et al., 2012). In other words, it is still quite unknown and opening up the field in Arab academia is immensely valuable for incorporating Arab voices in the recent ecocritical arguments. Such a project is not an easy task. Nadine Sinno (2013:125) remarks that

Such a project is a two-way street. It requires a genuine cooperation between Arab scholars and writers who are interested in environmental scholarship and existing ecocriticism scholars, writers, and editors in the West.

We further argue that it could become more appropriate in Arabic literary context because most of Arabic literature dwells in the natural environment. We hold the view that the green imprints of the Arab poets, like Mahmoud Darwish, can add to the largely Western studies of ecocriticism. This is because, as Hamoud et al. (2012) states that

Most of the Arabic literary works written during the postcolonial period express the intense relationship between the Arab writers and their homeland from which they get the spirit and inspiration to resist the colonizers. Among these Arab literary works, poetry and poets were present and took a central role in resistance during the period of the western colonialism of the Arab world. This kind of resistance was depicted in a number of poems in which the poets engage their environment in terms of nature (p. 76).

Over the last few decades, the advent of ecocriticism is regarded as one of the most significant developments in literary studies and criticism worldwide. Through the lens of eco-criticism, literature, as Johnson (2009:7) asserts, “is examined in terms of the setting and/or the environment”. The first emergence of the term
ecocriticism dates back to the 1970s when two scholars, Joseph Meeker (1974) and William Rueckert (1978), applied the field of “ecology” to literary studies. However, the term remained inactive in critical literary studies until the early nineties when Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s (1996) work, The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, became a fundamental guide to the continuing ecocritical debates in literary studies. Since then, ecocriticism has been growing considerably as a part of literary theory that focuses on scrutinizing the relationship between literature and environment. Cheryll Glotfelty in her introduction to Ecocriticism Reader (1996) remarks that “ecocriticism has been predominately a white movement. It will become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice and when an adversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion” (1996: xxv). This argument emphasizes on the significance of opening up the field of ecocriticism to incorporate more ethnic texts and writers such as the writers of the Arab world. In addition, ecocriticism also takes into account the intersection between ecology and ethics. Both land, in its collective meaning, and people are sums of the greater whole that Laurence Coupe (2000: 4) describes as “the biotic community” which are governed by the concerns of “land ethic” when he remarks that “the appeal to ecology is ultimately a matter of ethics. … Green studies may not want always to invoke a ‘land ethic’”.

Further Scott Slovic (2000:160) defines ecocriticism as “the study of explicit environmental text by way of any scholarly approach, or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationship in any literary text even texts that seem, at first glance, obvious of the nonhuman world.” This definition suggests that ecocriticism as a lens can be applied for interpreting any literary text. Therefore, the present article sets out to investigate the extend ecocriticism forms a suitable lens in the green reading of Darwish’s Memory for Forgetfulness to contribute to the growing ecocriticism discourse. We have specifically selected this collection because it lends itself very well to ecocritical interpretations and comprises green memories of the poet’s homeland he left behind and looked homeward with the eye of exile.

THE ANALYSIS

Memory for Forgetfulness details the poet’s memories of the homeland through the forms of nature. In 1980s, the poet’s homeland witnessed an extreme intensification of the violence in 1980s. Because of this, the text is enriched by recurring memories of the homeland environment. The poet keeps recollecting and writing. He listens to the morning songs of the birds, homeland memories of making coffee, the sound of the blowing wind, the dancing branches of trees, olive leaves and grapes. Living in such a colorful environment of exile transports the poet’s to the lost environment of the homeland. For instance, in describing the effect of water on the exiled poet he declares that “water does have a color that reveals itself unfolding of thirst (9).”

In Memory for Forgetfulness, Darwish weaves the memories of the homeland in which both the two worlds of human and nonhuman appear to be highly attentive of the presence of each other. He transports the reader, sometimes, to rural memories and, sometimes to a war-torn home. He incorporates the green memories voluntarily and involuntarily into the various forms of homeland nature such as trees, the grass, the wheat, olives leaves and the nature-oriented spaces such as the parks, seashores, gardens, mountains and making them vital to the poems both thematically and stylistically. In addition to creating eco-memories, he tends to present highly reflective memories of the homeland both in peaceful and dangerous times. The most common facets of the green memories in Darwish’s Memory for Forgetfulness can be discussed briefly as in the following subsections:

Facet 1: Homeland Coffee Memories

Throughout his work, Memory for Forgetfulness, Darwish seems to be extremely attentive to the taste of his homeland coffee which remains unforgettable during his years of exile as can be traced in the following extract:

I know my coffee, my mother’s coffee, and the coffee of my friends. I can tell them from afar and I know the differences among them. No coffee is like another, and my defense of coffee is a plea for difference itself. There’s no flavor we might label “the flavor of coffee” because coffee is not a concept, or even a single substance (9).

Darwish’s decision to give the “coffee” of his homeland a memorial voice is suggestive of Bakhtin’s dialogics, an approach that valorize the interplay of various voices in the text. In his essay entitled “the Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight”, Michael McDowell highlights the interaction between Bakhtinian dialogics and ecocriticism (as cited in Sinno, 2013: 129):

The ideal form to represent reality, according to Bakhtin, is a dialogical form, one in which multiple voices or points of view interact. The effect is a kind of dialogue among differing points of views, which gives value to a variety of socio-ideological positions. Beginning with the idea that all entities in
the great web of nature deserve recognition and a voice, an ecological literary criticism might explore how authors have represented the interaction of both the human and nonhuman voices in the landscape. By giving the “coffee” such different tastes and his ability to recognize the differences between them in exile, the poet shows that he is extremely attentive and mindful of the homeland memories via the taste of the coffee he used to have within the homeland. His constant eagerness to have the aroma of coffee metaphorically reflects his non-stop emotional interconnection with the homeland he left behind as can be traced in the following lines:

I want the aroma of coffee. I want nothing more than the aroma of coffee. And I want nothing more from the passing days than the aroma of coffee. The aroma of coffee so I can hold myself together, stand on my feet, and be transformed from something that crawls, into a human being. The aroma of coffee so I can stand my share of this dawn up on its feet. So that we can go together, this day and I, down into the street in search of another place (3).

Further, Darwish considers the homeland coffee as an inspiring power of his days of exile as can be noted when he declares that:

Because coffee, the first cup of coffee, is the mirror of the hand. And the hand that makes the coffee reveals the person that stirs it. Therefore, coffee is the public reading of the open book of the soul. And it is the enchantress that reveals whatever secrets the day will bring (4).

The lines reveal that the homeland coffee as a mirror of the hand and the public reading of the open book of the soul gives voices and colors to the memories that have been traditionally voiceless and colorless. The depiction of the coffee as a mirror is symbolic of the spontaneous overflow of the homeland memories evoked within the poet by having merely a cup of coffee. It is clearly noted that “coffee” in the whole text symbolizes his eager to the innocence of the homeland he missed in exile.

**Facet 2: Homeland Flora Memories**

Flora of the homeland was not absent in Darwish’s moments of exile. The entire environment of exile keeps on reminding him of his own motherland he left behind. The various forms of flora around him in exile remain as an antenna of the homeland memories. Flowers, grapes, olive leaves are some of the homeland flora that constantly flash back in the poets’ mind in exile as can be shown in the following extract:

Take this bouquet of flowers and scan the papers for the names of the people. They are reminders of the people’s homes. Take this bunch of grapes and remember the grapes of your home. Take this bunch of olive leaves and leap up to your own leaves (85).

The poet depicts metaphorically how the various forms of flora in exile evoke the memories of his homeland flora he left behind. The bunch of flowers, grapes and olive leaves he approached in exile represent the whole scenes of flora of the homeland from which he was exiled. Hence, they remain the umbilical cord of memories with his motherland, even though he writes from a distance.

**Facet 3: Homeland Fauna Memories**

In addition to creating vivid memories of the homeland flora, the poet also does not ignore the memories of the homeland fauna. The doves are presented as a means of recollecting and gaining insights into the human condition in the homeland.

Oh, my homeland doves! What are you doing here? What do want from me? My leave is over and I must be getting back. (93)

The poet identifies himself with the doves’ struggle to remain inside their homeland because he himself yearns to come back home. To sum up, both flora and fauna memories depicted by the poet represent the idea that the environment of the poet’s exile is a decisive step towards developing a better understanding of the homeland eco-memories. For instance, the doves’ dialogue with the displaced poet and the address of the bunch of flowers, grapes and olives leaves can be considered metaphors as well as actual manifestations of the eco-memories of the Palestinian situation. Furthermore, the poet is tormented by the idea of displacing the doves from their motherland just as he is deeply tortured from his homeland.

To conclude, by explicating the homeland memories of everyday environment in the homeland, Darwish’s text is memorial of the loss of the homeland. His continuous mindfulness of the lost homeland makes him terrified “I am terrified of falling among the ruins (24)”. He is afraid of death, of dying and having his memory extinguished. Writing is the bastion against this, the fort which guarantees safety from oblivion. Also, morbidly, Darwish imagines that “Perhaps a wall will slowly, slowly fall on me and my suffering will be endless.” (24) Writing, likewise, at the same time both saves and destroys the poet. These memories akin to what Pascal Boyer and James Wertsch (2009) regarded as episodic memories when they argued that:
What episodic memory was originally defined as knowledge of the “what, when, where” of a scene, as opposed to information that could be extracted from either a single or multiple situations without reference to these individual situations. (p.5)

However, Darwish’s use of nature to reflect such episodic memories has led us to regard them as eco-memories of the homeland he left behind and looked homeward with the eye of exile.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of Memory for Forgetfulness displays the intensification of Darwish’s preoccupation with his lost homeland during the second phase of his poetic output that spans a period of twenty-six years. Using ecocriticism as a lens, the analysis shows that Darwish’s eco-memories of his homeland prospered in exile to the highest level and manifested in three major facets. It also demonstrates that Darwish’s episodic memories of the homeland have markedly manifested through the various aspects of the environment surrounding him in exile. Furthermore, such green memories exposed in Memory for Forgetfulness have shown, to a large extent, how Darwish remain interconnected to his land of birth and childhood although he is displaced from it for years. He remains psychologically, mentally and sentimentally bound to it even though he is physically estranged from it. His effort to free his land from the clutches of the regime gains momentum through his employment of nature identified with his land. Like nature that never fades and never betrays, Darwish’s memories could never sever his umbilical cord with his motherland, even though he writes from a distance. By explicating Darwish green memories in this paper, we have provided some insights into a deeper understanding of the human condition via the environment that has shaped Darwish’s poetry and his struggle to raise consciousness of the Palestinian plight.

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